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# FYROM: A Source of Balkan Instability

George C. Papavizas

The state-controlled “Macedonian”<sup>1</sup> ethnogenesis of the Slavic inhabitants of Yugoslavia’s Vardar Province began with the Comintern,<sup>2</sup> Stalin’s right-hand political instrument, dispatching in August 1941 the following directive to the Yugoslav and Bulgarian communist leaders, Josip Broz Tito and Giorgi Dimitrov, respectively: “Macedonia must be attached to Yugoslavia for practical reasons and for the sake of expediency. The two parties must take up the stand of the self-determination of the Macedonian people.”<sup>3</sup>

Branded as the People’s Republic of Macedonia in 1944 and as the Socialist Republic of Macedonia in 1953 by Tito’s communist regime, the new confederate republic seceded from Yugoslavia in 1991 as the “Republic of Macedonia” (Republika Makedonija). Its official name, approved by the United Nations and accepted by Greece, the United States, and Greece’s European allies, has been the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM). The cumbersome name was adopted to avoid confusing the new Slavic republic with the historical province of Macedonia in Greece until a name acceptable to both sides could be negotiated. No name acceptable to both FYROM and Greece has yet been found.

1. The expressions “Macedonia” and “Macedonians” in quotation marks refer to the way the government of FYROM uses the words to connote the ethnic significance of the republic (a concept disputed in this essay).

2. The Cominform (Communist International) was founded in 1919 by Lenin to organize the communist parties throughout the world. It was dissolved by Stalin in 1943 and reestablished in 1947 as the Comintern.

3. Tsola Dragojceva, *Macedonia: Not a Cause of Discord but a Factor of Good Neighborliness and Cooperation* (Sofia: Sofia’s, 1979).

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FYROM is the most ethnically heterogeneous and politically unstable country in the Balkans—an area well known for instability—with this trait dating back all the way to Macedonia’s liberation from the Ottomans in 1912–13. Despite considerable progress made over the past ten to twelve years, a close look at the small country and its immediate neighborhood reveals that the situation remains fragile. Its internal economic and demographic problems are compounded by the problems FYROM has with its five neighbors: Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, Kosovo, and Serbia. The problems vary in severity from small nuisances to serious complications that may threaten Balkan stability.

In my previous *Mediterranean Quarterly* essay on Macedonia I undertook an analysis of the serious conflict between Greece and FYROM on the name “Macedonia,” an issue now lingering for twenty years.<sup>4</sup> I argued that because of its multiethnic structure and proximity to five Balkan countries of diverse ethnological and religious composition, FYROM could have become a serious link, playing a constructive and mediating role among its neighbors. Because of several internal systemic weaknesses, however—past habits acquired during half a century under a dictatorial communist regime—the new state has become a source of instability in the Balkans, and it will continue to be so if it pursues uncompromising policies in its relations with its neighbors and with its own minorities.

I also discussed how wrong FYROM has been to have invested time and money to incorrectly challenge the Hellenic historical, linguistic, and archaeological facts relevant to ancient Macedonia and to its Hellenic civilization. Insisting that its Slav inhabitants must be called “Macedonians,” a name dictatorially established and supported by communism’s brutal force and theoretical base in the 1940s, FYROM drove itself up a steep and treacherous hill in its unsuccessful effort to enter the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 2007. I also stressed the parameters that continue to contribute to FYROM’s so-far-misguided journey to integration with Europe and the need for it to find a name acceptable to Greece, its most important neighbor.

My purpose in this essay is to deal directly with FYROM’s relations with Greece and Bulgaria and to highlight the dysfunctional effects from Sko-

4. George C. Papavizas, “FYROM: Searching for a Name, and Problems with the Expropriation of History,” *Mediterranean Quarterly* 21, no. 3 (2010): 86–103.

pie's attitude vis-à-vis its two neighbors. It will be worthwhile to examine the nature of the problems and sources of instability stemming from FYROM's relations with its neighbors individually as well as the implications of these processes on the stability of the Balkans in general. I also include the problems FYROM is having with its Albanian minority and the Albanians' nationalist attitude derived from their age-old dreams for an independent state of their own, or for union with Albania and Kosovo to form a "Greater Albania."

### **Greece**

It seems quite clear in the post-Cold War reality that stability in the Balkans must be of great consideration and of paramount importance for all the Balkan countries. Stability in this multiethnic and multilingual region, however, may not be feasible unless all the countries work strenuously and in harmony to accomplish it.

In terms of maintaining stability and securing democracy, FYROM has been lavishly praised by the West as a place of stability in the Balkans and a good example of respecting minority rights. But a realistic reevaluation of FYROM's long-term dispute with Greece over the name "Macedonia," which prevented its entrance into NATO, and the reckless minority events in the early part of the century, refuted the stability myth created by the West and suggested that the horrendous events that followed could have destabilized the entire Balkan Peninsula.

This kind of history need not be repeated. The confluence of circumstances—minority uprising, disagreements on the use of the name "Macedonia," and ultranationalist tendencies exhibited by the small country—has hindered progress in FYROM's efforts to join international organizations. When one of the Balkan countries is obsessed with serious nationalist tendencies because of its inherent insecurity springing from its having changed identity four times in a century, and because of its oysterlike adherence to the name "Macedonia" that does not belong to it, keeping stability in a region famous for its instability is becoming a serious problem. And while the upheaval in FYROM in the very early part of the twenty-first century may be dismissed as insignificant, the underlying causes remain unaffected and as important as ever.

One of the most serious causes of instability in FYROM that reverberates across the Balkans, and even around the world, stems from the twenty-year-old dispute with Greece over the name “Macedonia” and Skopje’s absurd claims to Macedonianism, to an exclusive Macedonian identity, and to the “Macedonian” language. FYROM’s expropriation of the name “Macedonia” that Greece has been using for three thousand years for its large northern territory, and its attempts to alter the Macedonian history, was expertly outlined in a letter signed by scholars of Greek-Roman antiquity from around the world to President Barack Obama on 18 May 2009.<sup>5</sup> The scholars requested that the president “clean up some of the historical debris left by the Bush administration” in the Balkans. By “debris” the letter referred to President George W. Bush’s decision to unilaterally recognize FYROM as the “Republic of Macedonia” in 2004, violating the 1993 United Nations decision about a temporary name until a permanent solution on the name can be negotiated between Athens and Skopje.

FYROM’s twenty-year-long misguided journey toward securing an exclusive ownership of the name “Macedonia” goes deeper than the name itself. It is integrally linked to its proclivity in using illiberal and unfounded historical misinformation to support its rights to Macedonianism and to the Macedonian identity, and at the same time discredit Macedonian Hellenism.<sup>6</sup> The unprecedented authoritarian usurpation of a neighbor’s name, civilization, and national culture and pride, and the lingering dispute, do not augur well for FYROM’s reputation and stability in the Balkans.

In an apparent but belated effort to stem the spread of misinformation detrimental to the security and international reputation of his fledgling country, Kiro Gligorov, the first president of FYROM, in a moment of repentance, admitted in Rome on 31 October 1991 that “it is inconceivable to think that today’s Slavomacedonians are descendants of Alexander the Great.”<sup>7</sup> Later in Skopje, he said to a group of Greek journalists, “We do not insist we are

5. “Letter to President Barack Obama,” 18 May 2009, [Macedonia-evidence.org/Obama-letter.html](http://Macedonia-evidence.org/Obama-letter.html). Originally signed by 200 classicists, the letter had 372 classicist signatories as of 8 December 2011.

6. George C. Papavizas, *Claiming Macedonia: The Struggle for the Heritage, Territory, and Name of the Historic Hellenic Land, 1862–2004* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006). See also V. Gatzoulis, ed., *Macedonia-Evidence* (Whitestone, NY: Pan-Macedonian Studies Center, 2011).

7. *Macedonia-Evidence*, 11357–1730.

descendants of Alexander the Great or the ancient Macedonians. We are Slavs, and we came to this area in the sixteenth century, AD.”<sup>8</sup> If FYROM is to survive and prosper in the future, it must realistically reevaluate its political posture on the name and maintain good relations with Greece to improve its reputation and stability, prerequisites for joining NATO and the European Union. This way, FYROM will also continue to enjoy Greek financial investments and access to the port of Thessaloniki in Greek Macedonia, a short distance from Skopje.

Instead of promoting peace, stability, and democracy in the Balkans, the Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE), with Nikola Gruevski as leader and prime minister of FYROM, has embarked on an effort to spread its propaganda tentacles to the outside world, especially to the United States and Canada, by supporting and promoting several ultranationalist organizations. The best known such organization is the United Macedonian Diaspora (UMD), headed by Metodija A. Koloski.<sup>9</sup> Emboldened by the rush of thoughtless and politically motivated propaganda stunts, UMD methodically and ruthlessly displays a naked and well-financed and intransigent propaganda effort, the main target of which is Greece.

In 2007, Koloski wrote in the conservative *Washington Times*, “The real reason for the dispute between Athens and Skopje is not the name, but the fact that Greece annexed by force large sections of the historic Macedonia after the Balkan Wars of 1912–13. Greece denies the existence of the Macedonian people and has pursued through the years a policy of violent integration. The policy is tantamount to genocide.”<sup>10</sup> Curiously, he did not mention that Serbia—FYROM’s predecessor—also “annexed by force” about 38 percent of the liberated Macedonia, both countries receiving the lion’s share by virtue of the Treaty of Bucharest of 1913.<sup>11</sup> These kinds of inflammatory statements, based on distortion of historical facts, do not and will not promote stability and peace in the Balkans.

8. Ibid.

9. The UMD is affiliated with MacNews.com, an Internet website that frequently engages in emotional statements against FYROM’s neighbors, especially Greece.

10. Metodija A. Koloski, “Name Dispute or Ethnic Misdeeds?” *Washington Times*, 14 October 2007.

11. The Treaty of Bucharest, signed at the end of the Balkan Wars (10 August 1913) by Greece, Bulgaria, and Serbia, divided the area of Macedonia liberated from the Ottomans as follows: Greece received 52 percent (corresponds to about 75 percent of historic Macedonia), Serbia 38 percent, Bulgaria 9 percent, and Albania 1 percent.

## Bulgaria

It seems quite clear now that even twenty years since FYROM's secession from Yugoslavia, Bulgaria continues to deny Skopje's claim that its so-called Macedonian language is distinct from the Bulgarian. The dispute between the two countries goes deeper than FYROM's expropriation of the Bulgarian language and its denomination as "Macedonian." To understand the complexity of the relations between the two countries and the origin of FYROM's discursive strategies and behavior vis-à-vis Bulgaria, we must go back to the end of the nineteenth century, when the Macedonian problem had come to the front under the Ottoman occupation.

Emboldened by Russia's support of Bulgaria at the end of the nineteenth century, and to expedite Macedonia's Bulgarization under the Ottomans by activism, or by violence if needed, Damien Grueff, a school master; Christo Tatarcheff, a doctor; Gotse Delchev; and others founded in 1893 the Secret Macedono-Adrianople Revolutionary Committee (Tajna Makedonska-Odrinska Revolucionna Organizacija, TMORO), directed by a central committee.<sup>12</sup> The first goal of the organization was Macedonian autonomy and the promotion of the Bulgarian interests in a way that, if conditions became favorable, Macedonia could easily be annexed by Bulgaria in a manner similar to Eastern Rumelia's annexation by Bulgaria in 1885. The organization's Bulgarian character—and the lack of any mention of a separate Macedonian ethnicity—became known with absolute clarity.<sup>13</sup>

Because of disagreements within the TMORO ranks, a strong splinter group was reorganized in 1907 as the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO) (Vatreshna Makedonska Revolucionna Organizacija, VMRO).<sup>14</sup> By the end of the twentieth century, IMRO was known in Skopje as VMRO and its political party as VMRO-DPMNE. As with everything else, Skopje expropriated IMRO's revolutionary ideas and aspirations, but this time at Bulgaria's expense, depriving Bulgaria of its rights to a revolutionary,

12. Douglas Dakin, *The Greek Struggle in Macedonia: 1897–1913* (Thessaloniki: Museum of the Macedonian Struggle, Institute for Balkan Studies, 1966).

13. Vlasis Vlasides, "Macedonia's Autonomy: From Theory to Practice," in *Identities in Macedonia* [in Greek], ed. V. Gounaris et al. (Athens: Ekthesis Papazisi, 1997), 63–83.

14. Papavizas, *Claiming Macedonia*.

supernationalist organization previously working exclusively for Macedonia's Bulgarization.

In the post–Cold War realities, the VMRO-DPMNE is the facade behind which looms large the real power, VMRO, representing the extreme national views and positions in Skopje that contributed to both the obvious and hidden inimical relations with FYROM's neighbors and with the Albanian minority. In the fledgling state, VMRO's platform is anticommunist, anti-Albanian, anti-Serbian, nationalist, and underground anti-Bulgarian. Its aim is to create an ethnically pure nation-state in which only one ethnic group must dominate the FYROM population.

There is now ample evidence to suggest that none of the old IMRO founders and subsequent revolutionaries renounced the Bulgarian nationality, a fact shown by reading their diaries. Their well-known devotion to Bulgarianism renders meaningless the unjustifiable comments by the Slavic "Macedonian" diaspora, which insists that IMRO's leaders "must have been confused about their ethnic identity." Gotse Delchev, for instance, was not confused. He considered himself a descendant of Vasil Levski, the Bulgarian hero who gave his life fighting the Turks for Bulgaria's liberation.

Encouraged by the Ottoman Empire's anticipated collapse in the Balkans, on 20 July 1903 (the Feast of Prophet Elijah) the Bulgarian clandestine organization called on all Christians of Macedonia to revolt against the Turks. The uncoordinated, undisciplined, and poorly executed Ilinden uprising that followed, with IMRO's Gotse Delchev one of the uprising's leaders, was quickly suppressed by the Turks, who turned their wrath mostly against the Greeks and the Hellenized Vlachs in the centers of revolt, Krushevo and Smilevo. Ilinden's Bulgarian character, and the lack of any mention of a "Macedonian" ethnicity involved in the uprising, was known with certainty.<sup>15</sup> Even the Slavs of the Vardar province, who objected to the idea of a "Greater Bulgaria," did not dispute the Bulgarian character of the uprising.<sup>16</sup> Gotse Delchev always referred to Vardar province's Slavs as Bulgarians.

Lest the FYROM Slav "Macedonians" be left out of the Ilinden "glory," they grabbed the uprising's torch from the Bulgarians when the Cominform abandoned Bulgaria as a suitor for Macedonia in 1941–44, supporting Tito's

15. Vlasides.

16. Marcia McDermott, *Freedom of Death: The Life of Gotse-Delchev* (London: Journeyman, 1978).

claim on Macedonia. Despite the proven link between Ilinden and Bulgarian revolutionaries, the uprising was later usurped by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia and still later by FYROM politicians and branded as a struggle for liberation of the “Macedonian nation,” another historical misinterpretation. FYROM politicians and historians cleverly used Ilinden as an excuse to give credence to their separate ethnic identity as “Macedonians.”

Furthermore, to hide the discursive interpretation of Ilinden’s history, countless documents, published or collected in Skopje, hail the Bulgarian uprising as the Slav “Macedonians’” own ethnic revolution against the Ottoman tyranny and as the pillar of a new nation’s birth, the Slavic “Macedonian” nation. Ilinden was lionized in Skopje as the beginning of the “Macedonian” people to claim their rightful name and independence. In actuality, it was no more than terrorization by an uncontrolled mob burning everything in sight.<sup>17</sup> Silently, but for certain, Bulgaria never forgave Skopje for the expropriation of its history.

In a recent symposium on the importance of Ilinden in the awakening of the “Macedonian” national consciousness, sponsored by the Harriman Institute of Columbia University, attended by the first FYROM president, Gligorov, no one mentioned that the uprising was staged by Bulgarians who also invited other nationalities — especially the Greeks of Macedonia — to participate in the revolt against the sultan. The so-called Manifesto of Krushevo, written in Bulgarian during the uprising, is applauded in Skopje today as the pillar of the new “Macedonian nation.” Such is the logic of repeated myth-making that has dominated FYROM’s efforts to support its “Macedonianism.” No one mentioned that the Turks turned their wrath against the cities of Krushevo and Smilevo, killing people and burning houses and stores, most of them belonging to Greeks.

The rivalry between Bulgaria and Yugoslavia intensified when in 1941 the Germans allowed the Bulgarian fascist army to occupy south Yugoslavia, including Vardar province.<sup>18</sup> In October 1946, to further support its fabrications, Skopje (and Tito) forced the Bulgarians to transfer to Skopje Gotse Delchev’s remains, where they were presented to the public with great fanfare

17. Dakin.

18. Spyros Kouzinopoulos, *Pages of the Secret Diary of Giorgi Dimitrov* (in Greek) (Athens: Ekthosis Kastanioti, 1999).

during an official ceremony. On that day, the Ilinden hero, like many other Greek and Bulgarian heroes, was deprived postmortem of his ethnic Bulgarian identity, one of the most unusual ethnic transformations in modern times. Following the posthumous “award” with the “Macedonian” mantle bestowed on a genuine Bulgarian hero, one of the first founders of IMRO, three thousand volumes from the ethnological collection of the former Scientific Macedonian Institute of the Bulgarian capital were also transferred to Skopje.<sup>19</sup>

On 8 September 1991, a new event dramatically changed existing strategic contextual realities and multiplied the possibilities for an increased Balkan instability. While communism was crumbling in Europe, Tito’s Socialist Republic of Macedonia was converted by Skopje’s reformed communist politicians into an independent state with the name “Republic of Macedonia.” The conversion of the Slavic inhabitants to “Macedonians” was the last conversion of the region’s Slavic people, who went through a series of conversions in one hundred and thirty years: they were Bulgarians from 1862 to 1913; Serbianized Slavs from 1913 till the German army occupied Yugoslavia in 1941; and Bulgarians again from 1941 to 1944, proudly brandishing Bulgarian and Nazi German flags during the occupation of south Yugoslavia by the fascist Bulgarian army (a gift from Hitler to Bulgaria for joining Germany in World War II). They became Yugoslav partisans during the occupation and, finally, communist “Macedonians” by 1944–45, with new roots, new “Macedonian” history, and a new “Macedonian” language.<sup>20</sup>

Regarding the small republic as western Bulgaria and claiming its Slavic people were Bulgarians, speaking a Bulgarian dialect, did not deter Bulgaria from being the first country to recognize FYROM as a state, not as a “Macedonian nation,” ostensibly to protect the new republic’s large Bulgarian population. Bulgaria’s strange, meaningless, and accommodating political maneuver can be understood only if we consider its history, especially its struggle for liberation from the Ottomans and the facts of losing the most glorious pages of its history. Since Bulgaria’s modern emergence in 1878, its dreams for an enlarged country have fallen short because of unfortunate choices and repeated political and military mistakes. Recognizing FYROM as a “Macedonian nation” and its language as “Macedonian” would have

19. Papavizas, *Claiming Macedonia*.

20. *Ibid.*

erased the memory of its Bulgarian heroes whose names, integrally linked with Bulgaria's Balkan history, have been expropriated by Skopje.

It renders meaningless the discussion of Bulgaria's refusal to recognize the "Macedonian" language, unless we comment on how the FYROM language was born. To sever the linguistic bonds between FYROM's "Macedonians" and the Bulgarians and Serbs, a "new" language was fabricated in the small republic and touted as a separate "Macedonian" language, hailed as the language of Alexander the Great.<sup>21</sup> In contrast to Alexander's language, which had an alphabet (Greek), the new language did not have an alphabet until 1945. According to Marcus Templar, an expert in Balkan history, the language in FYROM now is a mixture of Eastern and Western Bulgarian and Serbo-Croatian.<sup>22</sup> In subsequent years, painstaking efforts were made to camouflage the language's fabricated origin, but nonetheless it remains an offshoot of the Bulgarian, forced upon the pupils from above. Skopje's claim about the language's origin has not fooled astute reporters, including Christopher Hitchens, who wrote in the *Nation* in 1994 from Skopje, "Bear in mind that the language spoken in Skopje is essentially Bulgarian, which is called Macedonian for convenience."<sup>23</sup>

The dispute between Bulgaria and FYROM should be understood in the context of Bulgarian interests at present and in the future. The language's origin, compounded by Bulgaria's tacit insistence that FYROM Slavs are actually Bulgarian, fuels an underground quarrel between Skopje and Sofia. The dispute is not only fueled by FYROM's claims on its language's origin but integrally linked with Bulgaria's equally strong disappointment in witnessing its historical tenets and ideals expropriated by Skopje, one after another. To counteract the Bulgarian claims, Skopje insists that the Bulgarian influence in Macedonia was ephemeral and superficial, with the Bulgarians unable to Bulgarize the Macedonians who remained true Slav Macedonians. Even the state of Tsar Samuel, a genuine Bulgarian hero, was "Macedonian," according to Skopje.

21. M. Nystazopoulou-Pelekidou, *The Macedonian Problem* (Athens: Association of National Studies of Southern Europe, 1989).

22. Marcus Templar, "Should We Be 'Baptizing' or 'Godfathering' the State Whose Capital Is Skopje?" reply to the forum "HEC Scholars" (log-in required), Hellenic Electronic Center, 24 June 2010, [www.greece.org/blogs/scholars/](http://www.greece.org/blogs/scholars/).

23. Christopher Hitchens, "Macedonia," *Nation*, 18 April 1994.

The divergence of interests that exist between the two countries does not end with the language and the ethnicity disputes. To promote the alleged existence of a separate Macedonian ethnicity and de-Slavisize their ancestral Slavic identity and history, FYROM and organizations of the Slavic diaspora have propelled the theory that the Slavic “Macedonians” are a “completely modern product” of racial amalgamation between the southern Slavic people and a mixture of indigenous descendants of ancient Macedonians.<sup>24</sup> Establishing such an ethnic connection and creating a new “Macedonian” language, initiatives that offend the Greeks and the Bulgarians alike, was not enough. The Skopje historians embarked on “authoritarian” historical revisionism to discredit Macedonian Hellenism and to sever all the links connecting Vardar province’s Slavs with the Bulgarians and Serbs. To accomplish this, all Bulgarian and Serbian documents had to become “Macedonian.” If the documents were incompatible, they were modified or discarded.<sup>25</sup> An illustrative example of this practice is the work of brothers Konstantine and Dimitrov Miladinov, *Bulgarski Narodni Pesni* (Bulgarian ethnic songs), printed in Zagreb in 1861. The popular songs were reprinted in Skopje in the 1980s as *Makedonski Narodni Pesni*. In addition to the songs, and to other Bulgarian popular music, Skopje expropriated Bulgarian expressions and names of several Bulgarian kings and heroes whose names were converted to “Macedonian.”

Realistically reevaluating FYROM-Bulgarian relations—the language problem, Bulgaria’s refusal to recognize a separate “Macedonian nation,” the expropriation of parts of Bulgarian history and cultural expressions—the relations between the two countries have deteriorated despite denials from both sides. In spite of all the issues, however, Bulgaria is trying to keep the dispute at civilized levels. But as long as FYROM’s intentions are exclusively directed toward de-Slavisizing and Macedonizing its people and history, violating the norms of international behavior, there are no great expectations for improved relations. In a recent interview, the Bulgarian prime minister’s special envoy on Macedonia, discussing the identity crisis from which Skopje suffers since its separation from Yugoslavia, declared, “The nation and state

24. Papavizas, *Claiming Macedonia*.

25. Nystazopoulou-Pelekidou.

were created in 1944 on the basis of the Bulgarian population that lives in FYROM. The new state tries to transfer its internal identity crisis to Bulgaria, Greece, and Albania.”<sup>26</sup>

The prospects for future instability in the Balkans, especially in FYROM, are the prime motivation for Bulgaria to internationally safeguard FYROM citizens who adhere to their Bulgarian ethnicity, or those who openly claim Bulgarian identity. Taking an even longer view, Bulgaria is issuing passports to people who are not intimidated, or who openly declare Bulgarian identity. It is estimated that more than one hundred thousand Bulgarian passports were issued to FYROM citizens, including one for Ljupko Georgijevski, the former prime minister and president of the ultranationalist party, VMRO-DPMNE.<sup>27</sup> The FYROM authorities, however, downplay the passport issuance to its citizens who go to Bulgaria, a NATO and EU member, insisting they go to Bulgaria only to find employment. This assertion may not be entirely valid because the passport receivers prefer almost exclusively to go to Bulgaria and not to other eurozone countries. Bulgarian politicians will shed crocodile tears in the event of FYROM’s collapse, because it would give them the opportunity to annex the largest part of it.

Expropriating the Macedonian name and the Macedonian ethnicity; intensifying its illiberal and authoritative history revisionism to discredit the Hellenism of ancient Macedonians; emblazoning Skopje and other cities with statues of Alexander the Great and of other Hellenic Macedonian heroes; and planning now to erect in Skopje the “Arch of Macedonia,” pitted FYROM squarely against Greece. Reneging against their own Bulgarian ethnicity and expropriating the Bulgarian language and parts of the Bulgarian history pitted FYROM against Bulgaria. And ignoring or mistreating its large Albanian minority pitted FYROM against the Albanians.

### **The Albanian Minority**

The problems FYROM faced with the large Albanian minority during the first ten years of its independence had little to do with the name “Macedo-

26. G. Voskopoulos, “De-Slavicizing and Relations between Bulgaria and FYROM” (in Greek), *Makedonia* (Thessaloniki), 14 September 2009, [www.makthes.gr/news/opinions/44320/](http://www.makthes.gr/news/opinions/44320/).

27. The former FYROM prime minister moved to Sofia, where he claims Bulgarian ancestry.

nia.” The Albanian minority problems should be understood in the context of interests of the largest minority in a small republic surrounded by two Muslim republics — and an inexcusable, grave avoidance of reality with respect to the treatment of minorities by FYROM politicians. Hitchens wrote from Skopje in 1994, “The largest national minority [in FYROM] is Albanian and Muslim, and does not care what the republic is called as long as part of it is one day denominated as either Illyria or Albania.”<sup>28</sup> The interest of the Albanian minority in the name has increased, however, since the beginning of the present century.

In classical antiquity, Illyria was a region on the western part of today’s Balkan Peninsula, founded by Illyrian tribes, an ancient people inimical to Macedonians, who spoke the Illyrian language.<sup>29</sup> Knowledge of the Illyrians is limited because we have no surviving texts, only a few words written in the Illyrian dialect. In 358 BC King Philip II, father of Alexander the Great, defeated the Illyrians and occupied their territory north of Lake Ohrid. In new clashes a quarter of a century later, Alexander defeated the Illyrian king Cleitus, consolidated the conquered land with Macedonia, and attracted a few Illyrians to follow him to Asia.

Many questions and doubts exist about the derivation of modern people from ancient progenitors. Usually, old sources of information are not reliable or complete, and contemporary sources may be dysfunctional or they may be influenced by political or nationalist prejudices. In that context, claims by the present-day Albanians that they are descendants of the Illyrians have not been conclusively proven, because the historical and linguistic evidence is extremely limited. Ancient accounts refer to names such as “Arvanon” and “Albanopolis” (*polis* is a Greek word), but it is hard to confirm or corroborate a connection between present-day Albanians and Illyrians or a connection between names such as the ancient word Shgiperia and Albania. There is not enough linguistic evidence to establish an indisputable connection between the Illyrian language and present-day Albanian.<sup>30</sup>

The Vardar province of Yugoslavia, now FYROM, is inhabited by 2.2 mil-

28. Hitchens.

29. Helen Abadzi, “Historical Greek-Albanian Relations: Some Mysteries and Riddles,” *Mediterranean Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (2011): 41–60.

30. *Ibid.*

lion people, 66 percent of whom are “Macedonians” (previously recognized as Slavs) and about 30 percent of whom are Albanian. The Albanians, who are Muslim, speak the Albanian language and believe in a “Greater Albania” that eventually will include Kosovo. The scenario that a “Macedonian” is a “citizen of the Republic of Macedonia [FYROM] irrespective of ethnicity,” promulgated by the 1994 “Forum Against Ethnic Violence,” is discriminatory because it grants the prerogative (and the glorious Macedonian heritage) to the Slavs and Albanians of FYROM alike, three-fourths of which, including Skopje, did not even belong to Philip’s historic Macedonia.<sup>31</sup> This scenario is also at odds with itself because it automatically converts the large Albanian minority to “Macedonian,” a concept arraying itself against the Albanians’ well-publicized distaste of being called Macedonians. The present Skopje nationalist political leadership of Nikola Gruevski does not consider the minorities as Macedonians.

The old distaste of the Albanians for being called Macedonians has been reversed during the past ten years. According to Driton Dikena, “The Albanians have historical right to take part in the talks” on the name.<sup>32</sup> FYROM’s extreme political Right deprived the Albanians of their historical rights to participate in the state’s affairs, especially in deciding on the right name for the country. Exclusion of the Albanians, if Athens and Skopje agreed on a name without Albanian consent, would be inexcusable for the republic’s stability. It would also add a new serious difference between the two major population blocs that would undoubtedly plague the small republic. In the end, a neutral name acceptable to all ethnic groups must be adopted, as in the case of other multiethnic states such as the United States and Canada. Continuation of the long-running name dispute and/or exclusion of the Albanian minority from discussions on the name would increase the Albanian desire to join Kosovo or Albania next door.

It seemed quite clear by 2009 that FYROM’s Albanian politicians had turned about face, expressing abrupt, intense interest in the discussions with Greece on the name “Macedonia.” Perhaps the belated interest was related to the Albanian minority’s desire to improve Skopje’s position to enter NATO

31. Papavizas, *Claiming Macedonia*.

32. Triton Dikena, “BDI’s Ahmeti Urges Inclusion of Albanians in Name Talks with Greece,” *Facti* (Skopje), 22 January 2008, 4.

and the EU, an important step for the small country that foolishly thwarted its chances to join NATO because of its desire to cling to a name unacceptable to Greece. The Albanians understood that national unity is required to solve the name dispute, with a new name guaranteeing the characteristics of the Albanian national identity. Ali Ahmeti, leader of the largest Albanian party, Democratic Union for Integration, declared that exclusion of the largest minority from the important name deliberations does not augur well for FYROM's qualifications to enter NATO. Gruevski's government promptly rejected Ahmeti's comments. Blaming the Albanians for their sudden interest in FYROM's entry into NATO, the former FYROM foreign minister, Slobodan Chasule, stated that "there is only one reason for the Albanians to be interested in Macedonia's entry into NATO. They simply want it as a third Albanian state in the Balkans."<sup>33</sup>

The irredentist activities of the Albanians that began before FYROM's secession from Yugoslavia should be understood in the context of their long-term interests in fulfilling their dreams for independence, to be followed by secession and unification with Albania. Undeniably then, the keenest eye on FYROM's stability must be turned to the blatant Albanian nationalism in connection with the activity of paramilitary organizations operating in the country and in Kosovo. By January 2001, FYROM's National Liberation Army (NLA), a branch of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) (*Ushtria Çlimentare e Kosovës*, UCK in Albanian), initiated attacks against government forces that eventually turned into civil war. The fear of the Albanian insurrection becoming a major destabilizing civil war forced the United States and the EU to intervene, pressing the two inimical sides to negotiate in Ohrid, with the negotiations climaxing in the signature of the so-called framework agreement of August 2001.<sup>34</sup> The agreement pressed Skopje to make concessions to the Albanians, mandated demilitarization of the NLA, and enhanced Albanian participation in government institutions and the Law of Decentralization (adopted 11 August 2004), that is, handing one-third of FYROM's

33. "Will Macedonia Become the Third Albanian State in the Balkans?" Strategic Culture Foundation, 11 March 2011, [www.strategic-culture.org/news/2011/03/11/will-macedonia-become-the-third-albanian-state.html](http://www.strategic-culture.org/news/2011/03/11/will-macedonia-become-the-third-albanian-state.html).

34. Ted Galen Carpenter, "Kosovo and Macedonia: The West Enhances the Threat," *Mediterranean Quarterly* 13, no. 1 (2002): 21–37.

territory to the Albanians. FYROM's capitulation at Ohrid forced its Slavic majority to a spectacular political and diplomatic volte-face, greatly curtailing Skopje's and the VMRO's ingrained arrogance.

The framework agreement was no small accomplishment, because the participants were able to calm an explosive situation—albeit a limited one—and manage to bring peace for at least ten years. Because of the foreign intervention, FYROM survived the insurrection by the armed bands of Albanian secessionists from Kosovo and from FYROM's own Albanian minority. Now, however, throwing the framework agreement into jeopardy, FYROM is systematically obstructing the specifications of its adoption, degrading the Albanians to second-class citizens. The heart of the problem is that the agreement's specifications lost the power they imposed at the time of the agreement. As a result, the Slavs and Albanians, though living together physically in a small country, speak a different tongue, learn history and traditions in a dissimilar way, and have disparate aspirations and different religions.

There is now clear evidence that the concessions imposed by the West via the framework agreement did not eliminate the divergence of existing interests between the Slavs and the Albanian minority. Moreover, the concessions gave the NLA de facto control of a large area in the Tetovo-Koumanovo districts, a strategy doomed to failure in the future because the NLA is not really interested in having friendly relations with the central government.<sup>35</sup> The ultimate objective of the NLA, and of its parent, the KLA, is to “liberate” the territory populated by Albanians and attach it to an ethnically pure “Greater Albania.” As a logical corollary to the foregoing, one may now assume that the Albanian irredentists' wishes would be the formation of a “Greater Albania” that would include not only Kosovo but also parts of FYROM, Montenegro, Serbia, and even Greece. The danger to FYROM would turn into a crisis again when the international force leaves Kosovo.

The strategy the West pursued in pressing Skopje to make concessions to the Albanians to restore allegiance to the FYROM government had double undesirable effects: it weakened the central government's authority without

35. Gregory R. Copley, “The Road to Peace in the Balkans Is Paved with Bad Intentions,” address to the Pan-Macedonian Association, Washington, DC, 27 June 2007.

restoring the minority's allegiance or guaranteeing a peaceful future.<sup>36</sup> "Unfortunately, because of the myopic policies of the United States and its allies," writes Ted Galen Carpenter, "the goal [a Greater Albania] is no longer a pipe dream."<sup>37</sup> The West discarded the mounting evidence that the KLA-NLA was a collection of fanatic nationalists and unchanged communists. At present, considering the dramatic events of 2001, FYROM appears stable superficially, the significant calm being the result of the presence of the UN Kosovo Force (KFOR) and NATO contingencies that keep a temporary normalcy in the small country. It is not a secret, however, that instability, stemming from strong ethnic rivalries between the two large groups in FYROM, is simmering under a superficial calm. Both Albanian organizations, the KLA and NLA, have spread their claws into FYROM, looking for opportunities to revolt again.

Faced with the great challenges of present and future Balkan stability, we must take note with great satisfaction of the progress FYROM has accomplished on this very important issue. However, a close look at its long-range survival would tell us that stability will depend, not only on its neighbors and on the NLA and KLA, but also on the high Islamic population growth rates that will place increased demographic pressure in crowded cities and towns and on the demographic changes in western and northwestern FYROM regions that have often been shaken by violence. Islamic militancy, coupled with FYROM's proximity to Albania and Kosovo, may eventually haunt FYROM, as happened with Kosovo. Everybody knows it, including the EU, NATO, and the United States, and everybody hopes for the best.

Cole Casule, a Skopje intellectual and former communist, told Hitchens in 1994, "The project of a Greater Serbia has within it the incurable tumor of a Greater Albania. And this cancer will metastasize in 'Macedonia.'"<sup>38</sup> The Albanian minority, "the incurable tumor," is of greater threat to Skopje than its neighbors if we take into account that most Albanians inhabit areas close to Albania that have high Albanian population. The Albanian Muslim population will be the majority—or nearly so—in FYROM because it multiplies two to three times faster than the Slavic "Macedonian" majority. Difficult-

36. Carpenter, 22.

37. *Ibid.*

38. Hitchens.

to-control Muslim forces will have the will, the numbers, and the power to topple the Slav-dominated government, creating another Balkan crisis. If the KFOR and NATO elements leave the country, a new breakdown in relations between the Slavs and Albanians could cause an internal collapse. Should this happen, Albania, Bulgaria, and Serbia may attempt to intervene, filling the vacuum.

Even after Ohrid, new clashes occurred between the Albanians and Slavs, threatening escalation of hostilities and increasing the possibilities for destabilization. The overpossessing and overreacting attitude of Gruevski's government is one of the reasons for FYROM's continuing insecurity, stemming perhaps from the lack of a name for the country acceptable to all its neighbors and to its minorities. Some politicians in Skopje believe that the instability because of the lack of agreement on the name, not the ethnic antagonism between the two large groups of FYROM's citizens, may be a serious enough reason for future disintegration. Gruevski, refusing to select a name acceptable to its neighbors, especially to Greece, continues to play with fire with respect to his country's minorities and its chances of joining NATO and the EU. On the other hand, viewing the problem of instability in terms of the Albanian minority's interests, other politicians believe that the Albanian factor is very important for FYROM's instability and for its chances of becoming a member of NATO and of the EU. The unstable and reactionary tendencies practiced by the VMRO-DPMNE, which contribute to instability irrespective of the reasons, perhaps stem from repeated changing of the Slavs' ethnic identity: Bulgarians to Serbs to Bulgarians and finally to "Macedonians."

The "cooperative" spirit between the Slavic majority and the Albanian minority developed by the decentralization process and the enhancing of Albanian representation in the country's institutions, including the parliament, was shattered by the contents of the obstreperous "Macedonian Encyclopedia," published in 2009 by the FYROM Academy of Sciences and Arts (MANU).<sup>39</sup> The document caused consternation and anger in the Albanian minority for its claim that the Albanians were not native to the area but were invaders who settled there by force in the sixteenth century, pushing away the native "Macedonian" Slavs in the western and northwestern regions of the

39. Branko Gjorgjevski, "MANU Shock for Albanians," *Dnevnik* (Skopje), 9 September 2009.

country. The encyclopedia's insinuations of a forceful settlement offended the Albanians, who believe they are native in the said territories, descendants of the ancient Illyrians.

At the heart of the problem lies the provocative encyclopedia's serious offense toward Albania itself—and more so toward the Albanian academics and historians who accused FYROM of a blatantly wrong interpretation of history, hiding its identity crisis behind the encyclopedia's pages. The publication forced the Albanian president of the Academy of Sciences to declare, "No academician who knows a little history and archaeology would have the nerve to write such nonsense."<sup>40</sup>

Overlooking FYROM's problems with Bulgaria, Serbia, and Greece, MANU academicians concentrated on Albanians, accusing them of being the "bad guys," inflaming existing passions and increasing the hatred between the two largest communities in the country. Because of provocative statements and major omissions in the encyclopedia's pages, the hatred between the two communities has gone beyond acceptable civilized behavior. Even non-Albanian citizens distanced themselves from the "Macedonian" encyclopedia. Considering the offensive contents, several Albanian academicians cancelled their subscriptions. Others reacted negatively, threatening legal action against MANU or demanding an apology. The Albanians were especially angry for being characterized as settlers in the FYROM area rather than indigenous inhabitants, not to mention several derogatory epithets bestowed on the Albanians and their language. The VMRO-DPMNE, other smaller parties, and MANU itself remained silent on the contents. Individuals such as Azan Daulti accused FYROM's "ultra-nationalist oligarchy" for MANU's "colossal blunder," also accusing the state, the prime minister, and the VMRO-DPMNE for funding and publishing a book that is not a true encyclopedia and for attempting to usurp Albania's, Bulgaria's, and Serbia's historical figures and heroes.<sup>41</sup> The Albanian anger against MANU, and the negative comments made by various countries—the United States, England, Bulgaria, and Greece—forced MANU to withdraw the scandalous encyclopedia.

In 2009, reacting to the contents of the controversial encyclopedia, Bulgaria warned that "it is unacceptable for a country aspirant for NATO and

40. *To Bhma* (Athens), 23 September 2009.

41. Azam Daulti, "Macedonia under 10-Year Protectorate," *Koha* (Skopje), 23 September 2009.

EU membership to resort to terminology typical of the ideology of the Cold War. . . . The encyclopedia's contents do not contribute to the strengthening of neighborly relations and do not curb the hatred."<sup>42</sup> Even if FYROM realistically reevaluates all its mistakes with the encyclopedia and all its other options related to the minorities, acceptance into NATO and the EU will be intrinsically tied not only to FYROM's policies within the country but also to improving its relations with Greece, Bulgaria, and Albania.

### Conclusions

FYROM ranks high among European countries in the percentage of minorities living within it. Because of its multiethnic composition, it was hoped that it could have become from its inception a useful and civilized contributor to stability and democracy and a mediating link in the Balkans. An authentic evaluation now reveals that, despite considerable progress made over the past ten years, the situation in the small republic remains fragile. It has the potential to become a destabilizing force if it continues to pursue the same old and uncompromising policies with respect to its own minorities and its relations with neighbors. What happens next depends on several contingencies, but two factors matter the most: the lack of leadership respecting the democratic institutions erected on moral and social principles and the Albanian minority's responsibility in observing national and international political traditions.

First and foremost, the small republic should extricate itself from its narrow-minded, ultranationalist attitude and from its self-proclaimed illiberal ideology and the pseudo-Macedonian nationalism.<sup>43</sup> Highly reliable historical, linguistic, and archaeological perspectives must be convincing enough to Skopje's politicians now to discontinue inventing and presenting a false Macedonianism that is not based on a scholarly consensus and on a textual Macedonian tradition. In the end, Skopje's Macedonianism is strictly based on "authoritarian history-free history."<sup>44</sup> Skopje must also discontinue the Slavic propaganda striving to undermine Greece's, Bulgaria's, and Alba-

42. Gjorgjevski.

43. "Letter to President Barack Obama."

44. Robert Marquand, "Twenty-three Hundred Years Later, 'Alexander Mania' Grips Macedonia," *Christian Science Monitor*, 20 March 2009.

nia's histories and civilizations. It must cease the expropriation of names of their heroes and emblazoning its squares and streets with Greek Macedonian statues and names of Greek and Bulgarian personalities and heroes. It must address the new nonmilitary threats to Greece and the underground dispute with Bulgaria.

The ultranationalist attitude emanates from FYROM politicians' age-old dream for an independent state of their own—no one blames them for that—kin to a glorious past, the past “borrowed” from other countries, not shared by anybody else. This is exactly their Achilles' heel, because the politicians' pseudo-historical illusions cast a shroud on the overwhelming amount of historical, linguistic, and archaeological reality supporting Greece's contentions about the name “Macedonian” and Bulgaria's equally convincing contentions about the “Macedonian” language being Bulgarian. According to the Athens Academy of Science, “FYROM does not have the right to acquire, by international recognition, an advantage enjoyed by no other state in the world: to use a name which of itself propagandizes territorial aspirations.”<sup>45</sup>

Before a smoothly working democracy succeeds in FYROM, especially after the devastating effects by the MANU encyclopedia's publication that jeopardized the democratization process, the Skopje leaders must accept the historical reality that their small country's multiethnic conglomerate population is not really Macedonian, as Gligorov already admitted. If Skopje were to opt for steady, friendly relations with its neighbors, it should be opting above all for good relations with Greece; only one word, “Macedonia,” prevents it from having excellent, mutually beneficial relations with its neighbor to the south. Greece has no territorial ambitions on FYROM's land, allows the use of the port of Thessaloniki, and is the biggest investor in the small country. Sooner or later, instability will force Skopje to opt for a compromise on the name. Also, a compromise on the divergence of interests that exist among neighbors will automatically increase its stability among the Balkan states. Relations with Bulgaria and Albania are complicated, involving territorial claims, demographic and language problems, and minority problems.

To Skopje, the non-Macedonian Albanian minority is a group of people who settled by force in the FYROM territories they inhabit today. At the

45. From the Athens Academy of Science, quoted in Papavizas, *Claiming Macedonia*.

heart of the problem in this respect lies the attitude of superiority held by the Slavs, who have no intention of negotiating seriously with the Albanians as genuine citizens equal to them in the republic. Skopje's unrealistic attitude, coupled with the name dispute with Greece and the language dispute with Bulgaria, jeopardizes FYROM's chances to become a member of NATO and eventually of the EU. When one seriously considers these problems, one will see that at the heart of them lies an unfortunate blend of circumstances involving not only the ideological and historical suppression of the Albanian minority but also the majority's attempts to monopolize everything that has to do with the government of the state, including the government itself. The argument by some countries, including the United States, that it is FYROM's insecurity that may push it toward disintegration and not the Slav irredentism and the Albanian mistreatment, lacks plausibility.

FYROM's entrance into NATO and the EU will continue to be stalled by the ultranationalist government in power in Skopje and by its stubborn attachment to an exclusive nationalist ideology, reminding a neutral observer of a similar behavior during the years of communism in the Balkans. In the final analysis, FYROM is not ready to be a serious candidate to enter NATO, and even less serious—for economic reasons—to join the EU. Realistically reevaluated, FYROM has made progress in the matter of its own security, and probably will never be a military threat to any of its neighbors. But even if the long-running dispute with Greece is resolved, the resistance to its materializing the dream to enter NATO and the EU will continue, a credible result of its own instability. Irredentist tendencies, anomalous relations with its neighbors, problems with the large inimical minority, its own ultranationalism and ethnic tensions, its encouragement of an ultranationalist diaspora, serious differences with Bulgaria, and its dependent economy will continue to plague the country.