

The Ohrid peace agreement, how is it working ten years later?

Violent conflict erupted in the Republic of Macedonia in the Spring of 2001 between armed insurgents from the ethnic Albanian minority community and state security forces chiefly representing the Macedonian majority community. Hostilities were brought to a close six months later when representatives of both the Macedonian and ethnic Albanian communities signed the Ohrid Framework Agreement brokered by representatives of the international community (represented here by the EU and the US).

The Albanian insurgents (who were never actual signatories to the agreement) mainly agreed to the cessation of their armed struggle because the agreement spelled out the terms of a power sharing form of governance more to their liking and that had the potential for creating a future bi-national state. In addition to amnesty for those who participated in the insurrection, it was also agreed that the state would be required to support bilingualism in districts where the ethnic minority population exceeded 20 percent. Quotas would be implemented in the police, military and other state agencies in order to achieve more equitable numbers of the ethnic minorities. The constitution would also no longer refer to the Republic of Macedonia as the state of the Macedonian people, but it would now stress the fact that it was the state of the Macedonian people and of Albanians and several other named ethnic groups.

It can be argued that the agreement to and the implementation of these and other measures increased a sense of fairness in terms of interethnic Macedonian and Albanian relations in the society that has helped keep the peace for over ten years. However, lack of follow up, particularly in terms of measures to foster reconciliation between the two major ethnic communities and denial of the truth of what actually occurred in 2001, has led to a number of troubling, unintended consequences. 1

These include the fostering of a culture of violence, since the use of guns was rewarded during the conflict in 2001, and a number of individuals who committed violent crimes during the conflict have not been prosecuted for what appear to be strictly political reasons. In 2000 there was a poll conducted in Macedonia that suggested that a majority of citizens of all ethnic groups rated crime, corruption, poverty and unemployment as more pressing issues than ethnic differences. 2 Today most politicians in Macedonia advance their careers by serving the interests of their ethnic community above all else. Thus, the individual, in the absence of adequate state protections under the rule of law, apparently often chooses to be well armed and take matters into his own hands when faced by criminal activity.

Another major consequence is a growing separation of the two peoples that is leading to ever greater demands for autonomy in predominantly Albanian districts. A while back there was a Gallup Poll of Albanians, asking them if they would favor a Greater Albania consisting of Western Macedonia, Kosovo and Albania. 81% of the Kosovars polled, 63% of Albanians and 61% of ethnic Albanians in Macedonia responded that they would

favor such a union. 3 In an era when such stable, long-time unions of peoples as Canada, Belgium and the United Kingdom are possibly moving toward division of their bi-national or multinational states, the Republic of Macedonia's ethnic Albanian community's restlessness should come as no surprise.

American professor Dr. Steven Meyer, for example, has been advocating "land for peace" deals in the Balkans for a number of years now. He has argued that in Macedonia and elsewhere in the Balkans, such ethnic separation and even new division of land through border changes and population transfers could be a good thing, to be encouraged as a means to bring about a more lasting peace among the Balkan peoples. 4

He is apparently less concerned than others that this rewards the use of force to change borders. It could also be argued that the creation of pure ethnic states encourages prejudice toward and intolerance of those who are different. Why, for instance, would a state bother to draft serious laws to protect minorities if the prevailing desire is to simply be rid of minorities? Lack of contact with those who are different also often makes it easier to create negative stereotypes of those not like oneself, which would seem to be a prescription for future abuse of those who are different.

Although tensions between the two major ethnic groups in the Republic, the Macedonians and Albanians, probably pre date the 14th century Ottoman Turkish conquest of the Balkans, when most Albanians converted to Islam while most Macedonians held to their Orthodox Christian faith, there is also a history of relatively peaceful co-existence in the past. However, these relations became more strained during the period of the 19th and early 20th century Macedonian liberation struggle, and again during World War Two. Over the generations the people passed on their stories of transgressions committed by their neighbors from the other community. 5 Even during the relatively peaceful period of Yugoslav communist rule, when there was enforced "brotherhood and unity" among all of the constituent peoples of Yugoslavia and certain incidents from the past were taboo topics of discussion, there were occasional public demonstrations in western Macedonia, where members of the ethnic Albanian community demanded more rights and recognition. In the absence of open and honest dialogue between the communities, such demands only served to heighten tensions among them.

The conflict in Macedonia in 2001 could be seen as a further manifestation of the will to greater autonomy, self-rule and even independence by the ethnic Albanian community. What was unique about that particular moment in time was the confluence of forces that encouraged militant armed struggle. The conflict of 2001 can be seen as an extension of the process of violent break up of Yugoslavia that began with the brief conflict between the Slovenian National Guard and the Yugoslav Army in 1990. The fighting that eventually broke out in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo in the ten years that followed finally spilled over in to Macedonia in 2001. The exact moment of the outbreak of violent armed conflict depended upon a number of factors. Census figures show that the ethnic Albanian population in the Republic of Macedonia rose from 12.5 percent in 1950 to

nearly 25 percent by the year 2000. A culture of violence has long existed within Albanian society, at times resulting in blood feuds, and increasing the likelihood that ethnic rivalry might turn violent. Other important factors were the spill over of the conflict in Kosovo and access to weapons looted from Albanian armories during a period of anarchy there.

The relatively rapid response of the international community (essentially NATO) to the outbreak of organized armed violence in the predominantly ethnic Albanian north and west of Macedonia in 2001 certainly helped reduce the armed conflict to less than six months in duration and to as few as two hundred people killed on both sides. The Ohrid Framework Agreement that ended hostilities was a quickly crafted document created expressly to put an end to the armed struggle. It has been widely praised by representatives of the international community for its success in this regard.

Now, some ten years after the signing of that agreement, the question remains: has the agreement provided a sound basis for the building of a peaceful, stable and just society in the Republic of Macedonia? The answer appears to depend upon ones perspective. If one is a Macedonian, an ethnic group that has felt threatened with extinction ever since the Balkan Wars and World War One divided the population and set all of their occupying neighbors on a course of forced assimilation of the population, the further erosion of central state control over nearly a third of their republic and a quarter of the population is a source of considerable distress. However, if you are an Albanian member of that society who has become increasingly divorced in recent years from the predominantly ethnic Macedonian society of the central state, the increasing autonomy and local self-rule fostered by the Ohrid Agreement must be a source of some satisfaction. And representatives of the international community, tasked with keeping the ethnic tensions in Macedonia from erupting into violence, might feel a sense of accomplishment in the relative peacefulness of the past ten years in the Republic of Macedonia.

Most analysts seem to agree that the Ohrid Framework Agreement has deterred further mass organized armed violence in Macedonia. However, there is increasing concern that it is responsible for an accelerated process of ethnic division over the past ten years. The gerrymandering of local administrative districts to create exclusively Albanian or Macedonian districts is one result. This has also aided a process of segregation of school children into Albanian and Macedonian schools where they are taught exclusively in their mother tongue. This division now extends right up to university level with the creation of an Albanian speaking university. And the continued resettlement of the population into ever more compact ethnic ghettos further defines the ethnic division of the country.

The Ohrid Framework Agreement, as mentioned, contains specific provisions for protection of Albanian minority community rights. These provisions, such as quotas for participation and integration of ethnic Albanians into all state institutions such as the army and police forces and various state agencies, would seem to work against division and separation of the ethnic communities. However, the inefficiencies and failure to

advance individuals based upon merit of such a quota system inevitably creates resentments. And critics have pointed out a number of other unintended consequences.

The Framework Agreement has several serious flaws that undermine efforts to create a more stable, just and peaceful society in Macedonia. The agreement, in professor Biljana Vankovska's opinion, follows an established pattern of flawed diplomacy in recent ethnic conflicts around the globe. She cites analyst Mary Kaldor in a recent study. 6

She writes: "To paraphrase Mary Kaldor, in its haste to fix the problem the international community fell into a trap set by the local parties in conflict, and rushed to embrace the thesis of ancient hatred between ethnic groups and the impossibility for them to live together. Thus, the simplest solution was to separate the "hostile" ethnic groups, to impose political power sharing and territorial arrangements that would guarantee a sort of negative peace (based on the ethnicization of politics and ghettoization of citizens from different ethnic backgrounds) ... Today there is almost nothing left of the idea of the civic approach articulated in the [Framework Agreement] document. Multi-ethnicity has been sacrificed and replaced by bi-nationality, while the power sharing arrangement makes democracy seem like a pipe dream." 7

Addressing the non-ethnic sources of conflict is one key to a more positive future for the country and probably the region as a whole. Albanians and Macedonians remain deeply concerned about unemployment, crime, corruption and poverty. While membership in the EU will certainly not readily solve such problems, the fact that most citizens favor membership is a hopeful sign. It means that most people in Macedonia aspire to membership in a larger union rather than an ethnic ghetto. They probably hope that it will force their local politicians to answer to a higher standard of conduct. One evidence of meaningful reconciliation will be when citizens begin to elect people to represent them not on the basis of ethnicity but on the basis of how well they address the society's real needs. 8

Thus far there is little evidence that those in power are following up in a meaningful way on the initial success of the agreement. In the ten years since the signing of the agreement, local politicians have not taken the difficult measures required to create a fully functional civil society. Too little effort has been made to establish the rule of law in those districts occupied by former insurgents, many of whom now continue to operate as armed gangs. Although a token effort was made immediately following the signing of the agreement to collect weapons from combatants, no serious effort has been made to reduce the large number of weapons in the possession of the general population. This has encouraged the growth of the culture of violence in which domestic disputes and criminal activities are accompanied by increased violence.

Perhaps the most troubling development is the unwillingness to aggressively prosecute crimes committed during the insurgency. No one has yet been prosecuted for their part in the shut down of the domestic water supply to the hundred thousand residents of the city of Kumanovo, the torture and mutilation of four construction workers near the village

of Grupchin, the murder of two motel workers during the mining and destruction of the Brioni Motel in Chelopek, the destruction of the St. Atanasij Church at Leshok, or the kidnapping and probable murders of at least a dozen Macedonian civilians and several Albanians caught between the warring sides in western Macedonia.

The International Criminal Court in The Hague prosecuted two representatives of the Macedonian state security forces for responsibility for an incident in the village of Ljuboten in 2001 when police killed several villagers during a raid in search of suspects following a deadly ambush of state forces in the vicinity of the village. Johan Tarchuloski recently received a 12 year sentence for his participation in that incident, while his fellow defendant, Ljube Boshkoski, was found not guilty. The sending of these state officials for trial was probably crucial to Macedonian aspirations for future EU membership. However, the failure to prosecute Albanians responsible for equally serious crimes only serves to reinforce the perception of Macedonia as a state where the rule of law is not respected.

Where violence is rewarded with property, power, and the like, a state of violent lawlessness is encouraged. In Macedonia today that is precisely the case. 9 There is little argument that the Ohrid Agreement ended the insurgency, drew former combatants into the political process and hastened the implementation of ethnic Albanian minority rights. However, it could be argued that the Macedonian constitution of 1991 had already addressed many of the issues surrounding minority rights and had, for the most part, laid a solid foundation for the building of a functional civil society. 10 The Ohrid Agreement, it could be argued, has actually undermined some of that work by rewarding demands made under the threat of further violence by an armed segment of an ethnic minority group rather than through the forging of legitimate consensus through legal, peaceful, democratic processes. And as a number of researchers have pointed out, there is growing separation of the peoples in the absence of a meaningful, on-going process of reconciliation to heal the divide between the two peoples created by the armed conflict of 2001. 11

The future, however, is never predictable. There are always too many factors that could alter it. People look at present birth rates, for example, and project a doubling again of the percent of the ethnic Albanian population in the Republic of Macedonia in the next twenty five years. Today more young Albanians in Macedonia live in small apartments in urban centers than ever before. Many are also taking advantage of new opportunities to go abroad in search of a better life. Albanian leaders may already be concerned about the affect of such changes on demographics, because they chose to disrupt the recent census process, delaying the head count indefinitely, out of concern that the count was not in their favor.

I saw evidence on my own most recent visit to Macedonia in the Spring of 2010 of reasons for both concern and for hope. As we drove through the countryside of western Macedonia on our way to Ohrid there was evidence of the construction or renovation of mosques or churches in a number of villages. One would like to imagine that it is for

spiritual enrichment, although I tend to agree with the comment of a friend, who said, "the people are marking their territory." 12

On the other hand, upon my arrival in the capital city, Skopje, I bought a newspaper and three things immediately captured my attention. There were efforts under way to ban smoking in public buildings, institute recycling of trash and draft legislation to protect the rights of gay people. To me these were all signs of a growing will to join their European Union neighbors in a shared civilization that would make Balkan primitivism a thing of the past. One can only hope.

I had intended to end my paper with the preceding paragraph, but events in Macedonia have prompted me to say something more following the brutal killing of five fishermen on a lake near the Macedonian capital a few days ago on Good Friday. It appears to be the work of someone intent upon escalating the ethnic tensions in Macedonia. Two young Albanian men were slain by a Macedonian policeman several weeks ago, and now five young Macedonians have been slain by unknown gunmen. Peace and reconciliation of the two peoples seem more distant than ever.

Yet, I have been thinking of late that Macedonia always has potential for a very good future. I look at France and Germany in an economic and political union after centuries of bloodshed. Ancient hatred? Meaningless. Despite all of the hypocrisy, failings of one kind or another, the European Union is a miracle of sorts, and Macedonia and her neighbors have good reason to ask for an invitation and every likelihood of being accepted some day.

All the same, I am a product of the tragic immigration due to war and poverty that has sent and continues to send many thousands of Macedonians abroad in search of a better life. My family has lived in this big melting pot of a country for many decades now, and cousins keep coming to join us. We are so insulated from the troubled land of our forefathers. As recently as last week end we had a celebration of Macedonian culture here. Our talented local Macedonian folk singer, Dragi Spasovski and his orchestra played at a dinner and dance in the town of Langley, outside of Seattle, and our friend, a former Macedonian restaurant owner, Ljupka Kolarovska, prepared the food, and our premier, world-traveling teacher of Macedonian music and dance, her husband, Atanas Kolarovski, led us in the dances. Atanas tells us: *Koj igra i pee, zlo ne misli*, "Whoever dances and sings, doesn't think bad thoughts." So true, and it was delightful.

I know that it is quite difficult to really put ourselves in others shoes. There is so little likelihood of real civil strife here; war, riot, racial or ethnic conflict. The realities in the Balkans are so distant and unknown to us here. Which is not to say that the people of Macedonia are incomprehensible to us. We have psychopaths who kill mercilessly. Gangs of violent youths who prey on those around them. We also suffer unexpected losses of loved ones from accidents or diseases. We quarrel and fail to love one another often enough. There is always some cheating and lying going on, as well as acts of kindness and generosity.

But our historical circumstances that created present day society are different, more fortunate for us. Yet, there are France and Germany, living proof that Europe does not have to be a source of endless refugees fleeing war, poverty and corruption. And when I imagine a better future for Macedonia, I think of places where civil strife eventually was overcome. Northern Ireland may not be completely healed, but it is making progress toward real peace and reconciliation.

Macedonians have had to endure so much suffering as a result of wars that settled nothing, had no reward but bitterness and regret, and division. I think there is a true reluctance among the people to settle arguments through violence. The avoidance of involvement in the bloody break up of Yugoslavia, and the taking in of Bosnian and Kosovar refugees during the conflicts there, and the reluctance to mobilize young men for a possible war in 2001, are all signs of a people seeking to rise above the cycle of violence that has historically included their land.

Today I try to imagine a way out of the cycle of increasingly violent ethnic tension in Macedonia. When I imagine that, I imagine the good people, of whom there are many, among the Albanian people of Macedonia, who realize that they must now, along with their Macedonian neighbors, take all measures to root out the monsters among them who would kill innocent people in order to further their interest in creating totally separate states and societies for the two peoples. Of course, even better would be a great public outpouring from all decent people in Macedonia, declaring that violent ethnic conflict between the two peoples must end. That they, like the French and Germans, have no need to hate one another. There is no need to fight for borderlands of the two peoples. They only need to look at the disputed border lands of the Alsace Lorraine region, between France and Germany today to see what is possible. One can only hope that their tomorrow will look more like more like that of Germany and France to the west rather than Palestine or Lebanon to the east. They stand between the two directions, almost equidistant.

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#### Notes

1. Vankovska, Biljana. (ed.) *Facing the Conflict Past: Why and How to Do It: Skopje: Evro-Balkan Press, 2006.*
2. International IDEA Project SEE: New means for regional analysis and SELDI regional report on corruption in SEE countries.
3. Adjievski, Milan. "The trial balloon," *Nova Makedonija, (Skopje), February 16, 2012.* web edition. [Novamakedonija.com.mk/](http://Novamakedonija.com.mk/)
4. Ibid. Also see [maknews.com/article/Seraphinoff](http://maknews.com/article/Seraphinoff)
5. I have personal experience of this in my own family from western Macedonia. I was told stories of how my great grandfather was forced to flee to Rumania after killing a local Moslem in the late 19th century. My grandfather would point to a scar on his neck from his participation in the Ilinden Uprising of 1903 and say "the Turks did this." The next generation told about being forced to attend a local grade school

- taught in Albanian during the occupation during World War Two. I was told other stories of the looting of Macedonian homes during the occupation. And now my cousins have their own stories of the looting and burning of their homes and their forced eviction from their villages by Albanian insurgents during the 2001 conflict.
6. Kaldor, Mary. *New and Old Wars, Organized Violence in a Global Era*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999.
  7. Vankovska, Biljana. "The role of the Ohrid Framework Agreement and the peace process in Macedonia." [ukim.edu.mk/](http://ukim.edu.mk/) 2006, p. 1.
  8. There is a basis for rebuilding trust between the peoples. Just as there is a history of hostility at times between the peoples, there is a history of cooperation in mutually beneficial projects and even some genuine friendships. I had cousins with Albanian business partners prior to the outbreak of violence in 2001. I was sometimes told how trustworthy such partners could be. And as recently as a year ago, when I expressed concern about our driving through an Albanian village at midnight in a car running low on fuel, a friend remarked: "Just be glad it's an Albanian village. The people here would actually come out and help us, while our own probably would not!"
  9. "An example of an investigation stopped against a former fighter, a member of the Albanian ethnicity, now a respected member of the Macedonian Parliament (Daut Redjepi Leka): Leka was indicted and summoned as an accomplice in a human trafficking crime, Despite the alleged evidence gathered (material evidence, identification and statements of the victim, pointing at him as the man who coerced a pregnant victim from Moldova, working in the night bar "Cafe Europe", to get rid of her fetus by beating her, forcing her to miscarry, and helping in burying the miscarried child), the investigation has not been completed, evidence gathered is now missing, and the whole case is still a thorn in the public's side." Sam Vaknin. "Human Trafficking in Eastern Europe," [sam.vak.tripod.com/](http://sam.vak.tripod.com/). Failure to prosecute those who committed crimes during the conflict has even become a cause for Amnesty International. See the report from September of 2011. <http://www.amnesty.org/en/europeandcentralasia/balkans/macedonia>
  10. Vankovska, Biljana. "The role of the Ohrid Framework Agreement and the peace process in Macedonia." [ukim.edu.mk/](http://ukim.edu.mk/) 2006, p. 18.
  11. Ibid., p. 25. Atanasov, Petar. "The program of the Ohrid peace process in Macedonia," *Post Conflict Rehabilitation* (eds) Dardel, Gustenau and Pantev. Vienna and Sofia. 2006. pp. 192-193. Slaveski, Stojan, Bakreski, Oliver and Nikoloski, Zlatko. "Macedonian Model of Ethnic Conflict Regulation," [globalpolitician.com](http://globalpolitician.com) . 2011.
  12. In the most recent period there have been a number of incidents of politicized ethnic tension. A rather harmless float in a Vevchani Winter carnival that poked mild fun at Islam resulted in large Albanian Moslem demonstrations in the nearby city of Struga and the burning of a local church. And a shooting incident in which a Macedonian policeman shot and killed two young Albanian men in the town of Gostivar recently led to smashed shop windows and large public demonstrations by Albanians who have declared the young men victims of Macedonian police brutality. However, this was followed by a peace march by several hundred people from both communities in

the capital, in which participants held placards that read: "We want to live together, not alongside each other in ethnic ghettos."