Into the inferno? Rage and fear in Macedonia: Rage and fear in Macedonia

by Paul Mojzes in the August 29, 2001 issue

Macedonia became an independent nation without firing a single shot. For a time it seemed that this small country of about 2 million might avoid the kind of interethnic warfare that marked the destruction of the former Yugoslavia, a federation that once included such now independent republics as Croatia and Slovenia. But with the inevitability of sand pouring through an hourglass the violence has moved from the north into the southernmost part of what was once Yugoslavia. Most Macedonians perceive themselves as tolerant and good-natured, and many are shocked and puzzled at the turmoil in their country.

Collective insecurity and fear almost always lead to violence, and Macedonia has been surrounded and suffused by insecurity and fear. The country's neighbors are mostly hostile to it and even deny its very right to exist. One neighbor, Turkey, ruled over Macedonia for some 500 years. Ironically, Turkey was the first of the surrounding countries to grant Macedonia diplomatic recognition and to trade with it. It helped that the two countries do not have a common border, but the Turks' main motive was that they wanted to irritate the Greeks. Greece, which shares Macedonia's southern border, thinks of Macedonia as northern Greece. It imposed a trade embargo on Macedonia for several years and insists that, in the UN, it be called "the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia."

Bulgarians consider Macedonians western Bulgarians and would like to absorb them into their state. Serbians used to consider Macedonians southern Serbs, but they generally acquiesced to Tito's decision to recognize Macedonian nationhood and the country's right to a separate language. However, the Serbian Orthodox Church still has not conceded full autonomy (autocephaly) to the Orthodox Church in Macedonia. Finally, Macedonia and its neighbor to the west, Albania, have been engaged in persistent territorial disputes.

NATO’s actions have made Macedonians feel even more insecure. During the Kosovo conflict, NATO troops traversed Macedonia from Greece, and NATO still uses Macedonia as a supply route. The sudden influx into Macedonia of about 600,000 ethnic Albanian refugees from Kosovo—an influx that coincided with NATO’s bombardment of Serbian territory—completely unbalanced the country. Not only were the refugees an enormous strain on Macedonia’s meager economic resources, but most international aid seemed to go to the ethnic Albanians and very little or none to the Macedonians.

Ethnic Macedonians were particularly distressed and outraged by what they read as NATO’s implicit message that it (and especially the U.S.A.) sided with the Albanians and were encouraging them to seek autonomy or independence in all areas where they were numerous.

When the war over Kosovo ended, guerrilla fighters of the Kosovo Liberation Army were absorbed into the Kosovo Protection Force, primarily financed and trained by the U.S. Some of this corps are now fighting in Macedonia. This has, of course, undermined the delicate coexistence of Macedonians and Albanians and has turned Macedonia into a time bomb.

Macedonia is a poor country with few resources. Macedonians want to become democratic, but have little experience with democracy. The country’s population is multiethnic. Turks, Romas and Vlachs live there, in addition to the ethnic minorities of neighboring countries, but two ethnic groups predominate: Macedonians (a Slavic people) make up between two-thirds to three-fourths of the population, and ethnic Albanians make up a quarter to a third of the population.

Due both to a much higher birthrate and migration from Albania and Kosovo, the Albanian population is growing significantly faster than the Macedonian. Macedonians perceive this as a grave threat, since they know that in Kosovo, even before the war, the Serb population nearly vanished while the Albanian grew.

The two groups do not mix much. Under Tito, Albanians in Kosovo and Macedonia lived better than Albanians in Albania. But in the postcommunist period many Albanians would like to establish a single Albanian state that would include areas of Macedonia and Kosovo. Macedonia’s Albanians resent the Macedonian domination of the government, police, army and higher education. Their aim is either to establish a federal structure within the tiny country, or at least a constitutional arrangement

that would give Albanians the power of veto over presidential decisions. Macedonian politicians are convinced, probably rightly, that such measures would spell the end of the country, and they resent Western-imposed negotiation while the country is threatened by Albanian terrorists.

Kiro Gligorov, a respected former communist, was elected as Macedonia's first president. Under him, from 1991 to 1999, the country was relatively stable, though he himself barely survived a '96 assassination attempt. Two years ago the Macedonian Revolutionary Organization–Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity, an opposition party, wrested power from the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia by the tiniest of majorities. It formed a government in coalition with the Party for Democratic Prosperity, one of the two Albanian parties. A little-known candidate, Boris Trajkovski, won the presidency. Trajkovski is a lawyer and a licensed local preacher of the Methodist Church. Macedonia's Evangelical Methodist Church (the self-designation of European Methodists) numbers somewhere around a thousand members.

Trajkovski was elected with the help of Albanian voters who probably considered him the lesser evil. He was slated to be a figurehead, with the prime minister, Ljubco Georgijevski, as the actual leader, according to the European parliamentary model. But Trajkovski gained prominence as the Kosovo and internal crisis progressed and international politicians increasingly turned to him as their partner in negotiations. That Western political leaders considered him more moderate than Georgijevski hardly endeared him to those Macedonians who want to crush the Albanian rebellion decisively before the international community (especially the U.S.) imposes humiliating concessions such as recognizing the increasingly aggressive rebels as legitimate partners in peace talks.

Late last winter a small group of armed ethnic Albanians occupied a few mountain villages on the border with Kosovo. The attempts of the police and the tiny Macedonian army to dislodge them resulted in more casualties to the Macedonians than to the well-equipped and well-trained intruders. The commanders of the Albanian forces present themselves to the Western media as the "National Liberation Army"—same initials (UCK) in the Albanian language as the Kosovo Liberation Army. They want to be perceived as fighters for greater political rights for Albanians.

To the Macedonians the picture looks entirely different. They regard the Albanians as criminal elements of the Kosovo Liberation Army who are fighting to protect their extremely lucrative routes for smuggling drugs, white slaves and arms, and whose ultimate aim is the partitioning of Macedonia and creation of a Greater Albania in which they would hold sway. To the Macedonians, the Albanian fighters are terrorists. They are angered by the UN's military presence in Kosovo, which until recently did nothing to prevent the free movement of the terrorists across the Kosovo-Macedonia border. The Albanian militants for their part hope that Macedonian forces will respond to their provocations with a level of force and repression that will drive Macedonia's Albanian population into a popular uprising.

Most Macedonians have reacted with blind rage and hatred to the rebel's military successes, which at one point included the capture of a suburb about five miles from the center of the country's capital, Skopje. By now Macedonians equate all Albanians with the terrorists. Ugly ethnic slurs and stereotypes surface even among intellectuals and in the press. Extremists scrawl graffiti such as "death to Albanians" and swastikas even on mosques, and shout "Albanians to the gas chambers." They want to be issued weapons to personally "take care" of the terrorists.

These were the tensions besetting Macedonia when at Trajkovski's invitation I went to Skopje in June along with Leonard Swidler of Temple University. I had met Trajkovski in the U.S. at a meeting of the United Methodist Church and spoken with him again in Skopje and Budapest long before he became president. He knew that Swidler and I were involved in Jewish-Christian-Muslim trialogues and had asked us to organize such a meeting in Macedonia, where no such dialogues had taken place. We agreed to explore whether religious communities in Macedonia could play a conciliatory role and whether a dialogue between religions could build trust between them.

Trajkovski told us that he hoped we could play a role in a five-point disarmament plan and process of normalization that he was working out with European Union and NATO representatives. We met with the leaders of Macedonia's Islamic, Orthodox, Catholic and evangelical communities, university and theology professors and representatives of NGOs. All of them said they were willing to cooperate.

Just two days prior to our arrival two representatives of each major religious community had signed a document in Geneva under the invitation and prodding of the World Council of Churches and the European Council of Churches. The statement

commits them to support peace and cooperation and to reject the use of religious symbolism or terminology to support violence. Thus the religious leaders we met were responsive to Trajkovski's attempt to engage the faith communities in the process of building confidence.

I have described the recent war in Bosnia and Croatia as a religious war fought by irreligious people. Among Serbs, Croatians and Bosnians religion served (and serves) to distinguish otherwise very similar people. Such is not the case in the conflict between Macedonians and Albanians. These two groups clearly differ in language, customs, history and culture. But religion also plays a part, since the vast majority of Albanians are Muslims (with a small Catholic minority) while the Macedonians are Orthodox Christians.

Religion's role in this conflict manifests itself not so much in what is done but in what is not done by religious leaders. At the office of the Reis-ul-Ulema, the leader of the Islamic community, we heard the complaint that the Macedonian Orthodox leadership is not condemning the erection in Bitola of a cross on top of the Muslim clock tower (Muslims built clock towers centuries ago in order to know the exact time of their five daily prayers). Nor has the Orthodox leadership condemned the shelling of Albanian villages.

At the archbishop's office we heard the charge that the Islamic leadership has not condemned terrorist attacks nor protested the terrorists' use of minarets and mosques as observation towers and arsenals. In other words, each side points to omissions and even commissions by the other side. But no one criticizes even the most atrocious behavior of people in their own camps.

The international scholars who have participated in the Jewish-Christian-Muslim trialogues are committed to their faith but are also critical thinkers capable of analyzing problems caused by their own sides. We hope to bring such a group of open-minded scholars to Macedonia to model how religious leaders there might cooperate in a more balanced and objective appraisal of the situation and appeal for tolerance and peace-building. The smaller religious communities, such as the Jews, Catholics and Protestants, might be able to make their own contribution toward such cooperation.

Whether the religious leaders actually have sufficient clout to make a difference is uncertain. Religion seems to play no role either among the terrorists or among most

politicians, with the notable exception of the president. Under communism, most of the people became atheists. But religious interest is on the upswing. A fair number of young people attend worship, religious weddings take place and churches and mosques are being built. More and more young people pursue theological training.

The Orthodox Church, in cooperation with many politicians, is trying to make the Macedonian Orthodox Church a state church, and the Macedonian constitution singles out that church's unique place in Macedonian history. The Muslims seem less bothered by Orthodoxy's status than they are by the lack of official recognition of Islam as one of the country's historic religions. But the recent negotiations addressed this issue and, as a result, Islam and Catholicism will be explicitly named as religions of the Macedonian people. Leaders of both religious groups would like to see mandatory religious education in schools—that is, each wants "faith-based" public schools for its own constituents. Smaller religious communities, such as the Methodists, worry about the impact such an arrangement would have on their children.

Since we did not have a lot of contact with ethnic Albanians during our visit, we cannot judge their feeling toward America. But Macedonians are very troubled by the superpower's behavior in the Balkans. Many are still angry about the indiscriminate bombing of Serbia at the time of the Kosovo conflict; most Macedonians either have relatives in Serbia or have studied there.

Macedonians regard U.S. actions in the Balkans as erratic and opposed to their own interests. As they see it, the U.S. first said it was unwilling to get involved in the Balkans and pledged that, were it to become involved in any way, it would act in a manner fair to all sides. But the U.S. breached both of these positions when it intervened militarily in Kosovo. It did so not only by favoring one side—the Albanian Kosovo Liberation Army—but by arming and training it and supplying it with military intelligence. Macedonians are bitter at NATO for allowing the KLA to operate with impunity both in Kosovo and in Macedonia, even though it had stated that its goal was to disarm the KLA once UN forces were in place.

Many Macedonians, therefore, suspect that the U.S. is assisting the terrorists in order to justify stationing significant forces in the country and making Macedonia into a protectorate, as has already happened in Kosovo and Bosnia. Their fears were intensified when, during the last week in June, U.S. forces stationed in Macedonia went unannounced into the Skopje suburb of Aracinovo with buses, trucks and

humvees, and transported out about 350 terrorists who had been surrounded by government forces. To make matters worse, they escorted them a mere six miles farther out to a village held by other terrorists (rather than to Kosovo) and, most bewildering to Macedonians, returned all their weapons. It's not surprising that the U.S. claim to a consistently applied worldwide antiterrorist stance does not impress Macedonians.

Nor is it surprising that almost immediately mass demonstrations took place in front of the parliament calling for the resignation of Trajkovski's government, which increasingly is viewed as accepting the dictates of NATO and the European Union. When an angry group broke into the parliament where the president's office is located, Trajkovski was fortunate not to be killed. People speculate that Trajkovski might be assassinated by those who consider him too close to the "international community."

"Democracy," "multiculturalism" and "human rights" —values touted by the many distinguished political visitors to the region—are now viewed with much suspicion in the Balkans. When George Robertson of Great Britain, the head of NATO, advises Macedonia on conflict resolution, Macedonians point to the far-from-resolved conflict in Northern Ireland. And when the Spaniard Javier Solana does likewise, they underscore the irony by calling attention to the Basque conflict that looms so large in Spanish policy. Nor has the way the U.S. has dealt with its own race problems impressed Macedonians. Macedonians are frustrated with what they see as a hypocritical shuttle diplomacy that ties their hands in removing terrorists from their midst. The terrorists shrewdly play a sophisticated game of exposing members of their own ethnic group to harm in order to gain the sympathy of the foreign press and media. And Western governments have further baffled Macedonia with a catch-22 proposal: they promise military assistance to disarm the terrorists, but only if Macedonians and Albanians can come to an agreement. Yet if all sides could come to an agreement, they would hardly require Western help.

Anti-American bitterness was exemplified by a group of Macedonian men who were kicked out of Aracinovo when the terrorists took it over. When they spotted us on the outskirts of Aracinovo, where a local professor of peace studies had driven us to see just how close to the heart of the city the terrorists came, they shouted at us that we "two Americans" had come to "enjoy their suffering," and that we were paying the professor so that we could relish their misery. These men clearly felt threatened, and their anger and aggressiveness was not an unreasonable response

to their predicament. Many ethnic Albanians have similar feelings of insecurity and fear for their safety, and react similarly to their situation by expressing belligerence and hatred. These tensions could inflict on Macedonia the kind of conflict that devastated Bosnia. Fortunately, the future does not inevitably repeat the past, and we may hope and work hard to help spare Macedonia such an inferno.

The situation now oscillates between hope and gloom. An understanding has been reached between all political parties, which has paved the way for the deployment of 3,500 NATO troops to collect weapons that the terrorists have promised to surrender. But the terrorists blew up an Orthodox church and monastery in the neighborhood of Tetovo after having promised to disarm, and they are most likely going to surrender only a small portion of their least useful weapons while keeping the rest for another day and another excuse. Amidst such ambiguities we are determined to engage religious leaders in dialogue to testify that neither God nor religious communities favor the use of violence for conflict resolution. In this work we are financially supported by the United States Institute of Peace, and hope that other agencies and individuals will join us.