

## The relations between Macedonia and Serbia

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**Abstract:** *This paper will treat the relations between Macedonia and Serbia. The separation of the Republic of Macedonia from the Yugoslav federation was carried out in totally peaceful way and without any military confrontations with its neighbor Serbia. This situation was the basis and gave hope for building great future relations between the two countries. However, things were not going so easy. The existence of aggressive regime of Milosevic in Serbia and his tendency to make Serbia a regional superpower were not the best basis for building an equal relationship between the largest former Yugoslav and most powerful military Republic of Serbia and the small and virtually without military power Republic of Macedonia. This paper will mostly rely on qualitative research methods. In this why we will be able to present the current relations between the two neighboring states including the historical factors too.*

**Keywords:** Yugoslavia, Macedonia, Serbia, bilateral relations

Geographical proximity and historical circumstances were factors which impacted Macedonia and Serbia in one part of their historical past to share the same fate and both being under the occupation of the Ottoman Empire. Unlike Macedonia, the uprising against Ottoman rule in Serbia was successful and it gained full autonomy at the very beginning and later in 1878 independence with a gradual process. Macedonia remains under the Ottoman Empire till 1913, when with the Bucharest agreement its territory became seceded between its neighbors. The territory of the Republic of Macedonia, as it is today, belonged to Serbia or later to the Kingdom of SHS. Within the Kingdom of SHS, Macedonian nation was not recognized as separate and was called “South-Serbian”.

On 11 October 1941, the armed revolution in Macedonia against the fascist occupiers began. By raising this revolution, Macedonia becomes part of the anti-fascist struggle of the Yugoslav peoples, as a building foundation of future

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Macedonian state within Yugoslavia, which will formally be realized with the decisions of ASNOM<sup>1</sup>. With the creation of the post-war Yugoslav federation there were some changes upcoming in this policy and RM became a constituent republic, the Macedonian people was recognized by the Serbian and the Macedonian language became official in RM<sup>2</sup>. Nearly half century of common living as equal and constituent republics of the Yugoslav federation contributed to creation of numerous economic and other links. With dissolution of Yugoslavia two separate states were formed: the Republic of Macedonia on one side and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia<sup>3</sup> on the other side. A good part of the Macedonian politicians tried to save Yugoslavia and help her transformation in some other form until the last minute, what was also the expression of will of the big part of the population, according to Ackermann “*A poll in April 1991, for example, indicated that 60 percent of Macedonian’s population preferred a restructured Yugoslavia of sovereign republic*”<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore according to Mirchev there were even some leading analysts from Slovenia that in 1989 wrote that the Macedonians are not mature enough for an independent state<sup>5</sup>.

Such mood in Macedonia was often interpreted as pro-Serbian, or absence of sufficient self-awareness for their own state. We do not agree with this because, although there was obviously pro-Yugoslavian feeling in Macedonia, it is not the same with pro-Serbian feeling.

However, in a given historical moment when it became clear that Yugoslavia will no longer exist, Macedonia correctly chose the path of independence. Practically with this it can deny the allegations of pro-Serbian position of Macedonia and pro-Serb feelings among the Macedonian people. By voting for independence instead of staying in a mini-dominated Serbian federation, Macedonia and Macedonians actually showed that when they talk about preservation of Yugoslavia actually were in pro-Yugoslavian mood and not in pro-Serbian, because at the moment when Yugoslavia could not survive as such, Macedonia decided for independence.

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<sup>1</sup> Anti-Fascist Assembly for the People's Liberation of Macedonia.

<sup>2</sup> In addition to the serbo-croatian, that was announced as official in whole territory of Yugoslavia.

<sup>3</sup> Consisting of Serbia and Montenegro.

<sup>4</sup> A. Ackerman, *Making peace prevail: preventing violent conflict in Macedonia*, New York, Syracuse University Press, 1999, p. 58.

<sup>5</sup> Д. Мирчев, *Македонската надворешна политика*, Скопје, Аз-буки, 2006.

Under these circumstances, the referendum caused distress within two ethnic groups in the country too. These were the Albanians and Serbs living in Macedonia. *“The referendum held in 1991 was nearly unanimous in favor of independence, with Serbs and Albanians, however, boycotting it”*<sup>6</sup>. Both groups declined to participate in the referendum and boycotted it but from entirely different motives. This was certainly a potential problem that has a capacity for breach of safety and security of Macedonia.

There was a significant difference between Serbian and Albanian minority in Macedonia. The Serb minority was far less numerous, somewhere less than 2% of the total population according to official statistics. Yet at the same time both minorities had something in common and that was speculating with their real number in order to use this for political purposes. Same as Albania, Serbia too did not recognize the official number of Serbs living in Macedonia. *“Serbia insists on special status of its minority that they claim to amount to 300, 00- 400.000 people (out of population of 2 million), even though, according to the official data, only 40,000 Serbs live in Macedonia and enjoy all the usual minority rights”*<sup>7</sup>. Still the possible danger was not arising from the relatively small Serbian minority number i.e. the potential danger to the security of Macedonia did not come from there, size expressed in numbers. Regardless of the percentage, the fact was that the Serbs decide to boycott the referendum, and with this there was a danger to play on the same scenario as in Croatia or to proclaim their own state within a state.

Their strength consisted in the fact that the YNA was increasingly controlled by Serbia and therefore they had the military power to implement such a plan. The possible danger from Serbia was much more real threat to the security of Macedonia due to the existence of a powerful military force in the hands of Belgrade. Thus the initial criticism and opposition demands for the YNA, following the example of Slovenia and Croatia, proved to be unjustified and a military conflict was avoided. This certainly was a great success for the Macedonian political leadership. In one hand the goal was achieved - YNA left the Macedonian territory and on the other hand this was done without military confrontation like in other Yugoslav republics. This outcome was not only products of the success of the Macedonian political leadership. What else was it

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<sup>6</sup> Dieter Mahncke, Alicia Ambos, Christopher Reynolds (eds.), *European Foreign Policy: From Rhetoric to Reality?*, Brussels, Peter Lang, 2004, p. 259.

<sup>7</sup> Д. Мирчев, *Македонската надворешна политика*, Скопје, Аз-буки, 2006, p. 83.

about? The real reasons for the withdrawal of Serb – dominated YNA was not because there was too much of a mutual respect between Macedonia and Serbia/Yugoslav army, nor too good Macedonian diplomatic activity. But also, leaving the federal army was not meant to provide automatic recognition of Macedonia's independence from Belgrade. “(...) *the only peaceful secession that has occurred in Yugoslavia was not achieved simply by Gligorov's tactful diplomatic style and acumen. (...) The Yugoslav Army's (YPA) withdrew from Macedonia, began a few weeks before Bosnia's independence declaration of sovereignty in March 1992, which was followed by heavy fighting there. Milosevic has decided he actually could not afford both to keep troops in Macedonia and to fight the Bosnian war*”<sup>8</sup>.

Actually it is about a tactical maneuver of President Milosevic who calculated that the further storage of military troops in Macedonia becomes meaningless in a situation when a huge Bosnian conflict is expected where a big part of the population is Serbs. At the same time, the withdrawal of the YNA did not have to be permanent at all, but only temporarily. Following that logic of thinking, YNA could later come back in Macedonia either voluntarily or violently. “*He (Milosevic) apparently concluded that he could let Macedonia go for time being, without necessarily giving up on its later becoming part of a Greater Serbia. Because the YPA took every weapon and piece of equipment it could carry and destroyed the rest, the new Macedonian state was defenseless. Milosevic believed that Macedonia, left economically dependent and exposed to the depredations of what were known as the 'three wolves' (Albania, Bulgaria and Greece), would crawl back to Serbian protection*”<sup>9</sup>.

Milosevic's strategy was based on the fact that the withdrawal of the YNA (with full military equipment) would leave Macedonia totally without defense against its neighbors, who, historically, have claims for its territory. Following this logic, Macedonia itself will require protection from its Serb neighbors and voluntarily will request inclusion in the new Serb-dominated mini-federation, in which Macedonia will have some kind of autonomy. The second scenario predicts a new division of Macedonia where Serbia, would take part on force. That Macedonia was left practically without any defense, claims Phillips, also “(...) *the*

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<sup>8</sup> R. A Hayward., T.R Gurr, L. Rupesinghe, *Journeys through conflict narratives and lessons*, Boston, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001, p. 161.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

*Yugoslav Army adopted a virtual scorched earth policy, destroying or removing facilities and equipment that was the property of the Macedonian Territorial Defense (...) Even military hospitals and stores buildings were withdrawn when the JNA pulled out*<sup>10</sup>. So, not only that YNA withdrew with its entire equipment and tried to make everything it could not bear useless, but it did the same thing with Macedonia's territorial defense, which consciously was directed in leaving Macedonia totally without defense.

The withdrawal of the YNA and this initial Macedonian victory could easily be of a temporary nature. Practically, the independence of Macedonia, at any time, could be prejudiced by a decision brought from Belgrade, and with the help of the powerful Yugoslav army. Such insecurity on, practically non-recognized by Belgrade, northern border of Macedonia, was a constant danger and threat to Macedonia's territorial integrity and sovereignty. Macedonia's infrastructural network was a way subordinated to the former capital. "(...) *nearly all of Macedonia's communications links, by rail or by telephone, were routed through Serbia and Belgrade*"<sup>11</sup>. In situation like this the construction of relations between Skopje and Belgrade were never placed on equal grounds, like between two independent states, but it was constant accompanied by the element of possible threat of a stronger side, which in this case was Belgrade. About the attitude of Milosevic to the rights of the Macedonian people for their own state Phillips states "*Milosevic was outraged by Macedonia declaring independence, accusing Skopje of stabbing him the back*"<sup>12</sup>. Accordingly, Milosevic believed that Macedonia itself by "having the nerve" to become independent, turns it back on him. With the fact that Macedonia did not want to stay in Serb-dominated Yugoslavia shows "ungratefulness".

But Macedonia will never be independent if it has a vassal relationship to Belgrade and if it lives constantly under a threat of possible intervention by the Yugoslav army. Therefore, the withdrawal of the YNA was not sufficient to insure the independence and sovereignty of Macedonia. Additional measure was needed. That kind of a measure was found in the Resolution 743/93 of the UN, about setting UNPROFOR troupes at Macedonian borders. These

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<sup>10</sup> J. Phillips, *Macedonia: warlords and rebels in the Balkans*, New York, I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd, 2004, p. 51.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 49.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.

troops were in a small number and with strictly limited mandate. Contrary to common conception, they were not mandated to defend a possible invasion to Macedonia, but they were only for monitoring and reporting about the situation on the northern and western Macedonian border. This was an initiative launched by the Macedonian authorities and represented a crucial move for at least two matters. First, and perhaps most important one, is that these troops were primarily composed of USA soldiers. This shows the beginning of rapprochement between Macedonia and the United States in one hand, despite the termination of relationships and subordination to Belgrade, from the other side. At some level this was a surprise to many who were seeing Gligorov like a person close to Milosevic, but Milcin according to Ackermann said: “(...) *Gligorov maintained close ties with USA Ambassador Zimmermann and, through him, with the United States*”<sup>13</sup>. Secondly, this move meant a kind of recognition of independence of the Republic by the international community and finally American dominated UNPROFOR troops sent a signal to all the neighbors of Macedonia who may have certain claims on its territory. So the departure of the YNA and sending UNPROFOR troupes were the most important events that strengthened the fragile Macedonian independence and sovereignty.

The first reactions in Serbia on occasion of proclamation of independence of the Republic of Macedonia were different and can be generally divided in two groups. The first group consisted of people with more rational attitudes; these are the politicians who correctly recognized the reality of existence of Macedonian state and the fact that Serbia “gave up” from Vardar Macedonia with the creation of AVNOJ (Anti-Fascist Council of the People's Liberation of Yugoslavia) Yugoslavia and also recognized the uniqueness of Macedonian people and language. The second group was composed of pro-nationalistic circles which still tend to see Macedonia as “southern Serbia” and the Macedonians as “Southserbs”. Pretty illustrative is following “*The Premier (Milan Panic) raised the issue in front of the federal government for recognition of Slovenia and Macedonia from Yugoslavia. The government accepted the proposal for Slovenia, and Panic had a heated debate with the President from that time Dobrica Cosic in which Cosic said: Well you do not know what you are doing, it is our people and our country, and we are not allowed to play with what Serbian army in history had shed blood!*”

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<sup>13</sup> A. Ackerman, *op.cit.*, p. 58.



*Then he spoke of the Balkan Wars: That part of Macedonia belongs to us and why should we now recognize an independent state and all in that spirit...*<sup>14</sup> (Translation by D.M.). Last excerpt depicts the existence of two streams in Serbia in the early 90s regarding the recognition of Macedonian independence. So, Prime Minister required a rather European move by Yugoslavia, by recognizing the independence of Slovenia and Macedonia. Such unconditional recognition would have been basis for building good relations between both countries and would certainly impact positively on the image of Yugoslavia/Serbia. However, this did not happen just because of the opposition by the second group, embodied in President Cosic in concrete example. The existence of two streams is reflected in the following two contradictory moves by official representatives of Yugoslavia, too. So according to the head of the Yugoslav diplomacy in Panic's government, it was said: *"It is necessary to normalize the relations with Macedonia and it should be recognized (...) and for Yugoslavia the name Macedonia is not a problem because it's their name"*<sup>15</sup> (Translation by D.M.). In parallel with this statement was also the statement given by then-President of Yugoslavia Dobrica Cosic who in writing to his Greek counterparts said that *Yugoslavia will not recognize Macedonia*<sup>16</sup>. (Translation by D.M.)

Unfortunately the Serbian-Macedonian relations, just a day before the New Year's Eve in 1993 at the Assembly of Yugoslavia voted for no confidence of Panic's government. Practically this means destroying the opportunities for quick recognition. The situation with the recognition of Macedonia and Serbia stagnates and Serbia/Yugoslavia was not considering seriously the recognition of Macedonia until 1995, when Gligorov had meeting with Milosevic and this question was raised again. In Belgrade in April 1996 both countries signed the agreement on regulating mutual relations by the foreign ministers<sup>17</sup>. Finally, almost 5 years after the proclamation of independence of Macedonia relations between the two neighbors became normalized and diplomatic relations at ambassadorial level were established<sup>18</sup>. The recognition of Macedonia was a positive step. But in reality it

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<sup>14</sup> К. Глигоров, *Македонија е сеитоимаме*, Скопје, издавачки центар три, 2001, p. 418.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 398.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>17</sup> Frckovski from Macedonia and Milutinovic from FR Yugoslavia.

<sup>18</sup> For first ambassador of RM in SR Yugoslavia was appointed Slavko Milosavljevski and the first ambassador of Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in Macedonia was Zoran Janachkovich.

came to a moment where no other option was available for Serbia anymore. Giving recognition so late opens several questions and concerns about the possible intentions and calculations of Milosevic about Macedonia. Occasional incidents on the Macedonian-Yugoslav border, speculations with the number of Serbs in Macedonia, the semi-public diplomacy with Greece about Macedonia's future have raised doubts about Milosevic's intentions towards Macedonia. However the presence of UNPROFOR troops on the Macedonian northern border and Serbia's preoccupation with the wars in Croatia and B&H seems to have been key factors in deterring Milosevic from beginning of possible adventures in Macedonia.

With the recognition of Macedonia and the normalization of the relations between the two neighbors none of the major questions were closed. There were other two major issues that had capacity to destabilize the RM above all. First, after recognition, remained open the question of demarcation of the former administration and now inter-state border between Macedonia and Serbia. This has to be done only with Serbia because the rest borders of Macedonia were already precisely determined and marked on the ground as southern border of the former Yugoslavia. Second, although Serbia officially recognized independent Macedonia and formally did not deny the specificity of its nation and its language, the SOC (Serbian Orthodox Church) refused to recognize the MOC (Macedonian Orthodox Church). Namely SOC treated MOC as its part, in the same way like in the time when the Vardar part of Macedonia was "southern Serbia". Prolonging to resolve these problematic issues by Milosevic gives us the right to doubt in certain rear intentions and deliberately keeping these potential destabilizing moments open that at certain moments could be activated. Thus, we can only speculate about the interest which Milosevic had with leaving the border question opened, whether it could be future requests for certain changes in the former administrative border, or it would have some role in the future solving of the Kosovo issue.

Whatever the motives and speculation are, one thing is for sure, the demarcation of the border, and although classified as a matter of purely technical nature it was devilishly hard work. It was actually one of the bitterest issues for the Macedonian foreign policy. Macedonia had to negotiate with Belgrade in an official instance, but Kosovo asked to be involved too. Belgrade opposed this because for them Kosovo was not a state so it cannot be official negotiation party. On the other hand Kosovo authorities threatened that will not respect any agreement between Skopje and Belgrade if they are not included in this process



too. This condition has put Macedonia in very hard situation. Coincidentally or not, the military conflict in Macedonia from 2001 broke out immediately after the agreement between Macedonia and SR Yugoslavia about marking the border.

The second open issue was the issue of constant denial position of SOC towards the autocephalous status of Macedonian Orthodox Church. If the border issue was qualified as purely technical issue, then this issue was qualified by Milosevic as a religious and not interstate. Treating the issue as a matter with religious character also continued after the era of Milosevic in Serbia and was slowly accepted by Macedonian side too. The basis of this claim is in the constitutions of both states in which it is stated that religion/church is separated from the state. According to this whenever somebody asked for resolving of this issue on state level, it was simply said that politicians cannot influence the SOC because the church is separated from the state. The constitutional provisions for separation of church from state in both states are undisputed. But we do not agree that this issue is of a purely religious nature. It is rather a particularly sensitive issue with deep historical roots that can affect the relations between Serbia and Macedonia. In reality, very little was missing to break out an interstate incident when SOC banned officially celebration of the holiday Ilinden in the monastery "Prohor Pcinski"<sup>19</sup> and removed all signs indicating that in this monastery the Macedonian state was founded or when there're some incidents with the unrecognized Archdiocese of Vranishkovski. In our believe, keeping this issue under the carpet hides a possible danger and possible generator of future instabilities in Macedonia that can certainly be reflected in the Macedonian - Serbian relations and can very easily get out of the context of "religious" issue.

The following is also noted as positive things that give a good stimulus for building future relations between Serbia and Macedonia:

Firstly, mutual recognition of existence of minorities in both countries. In any of the republics, there is certain number of ethnic minority members, who are actual majority members the other neighboring Republic. That means that in RM there are citizens, members of the Serbian ethnic minority and in Serbia and there are citizens of Macedonian ethnic origin. In both countries, these minorities are recognized and enjoy the usual minority rights. In RM Serbs are even mentioned in

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<sup>19</sup> Here was held the session of ASNOM and after the demarcation between Serbia and Macedonia belonged to Serbian territory.

the Constitution. Serbs themselves by organizing into political parties and their participation in coalition governments that are typical of Macedonia are often part of the highest executive in the country. In Serbia, otherwise, the Macedonians have generally satisfactory level of respect of their minority rights, especially in Vojvodina, more concretely in Jabuka.

Secondly, the recognition of Macedonia under its constitutional name, despite the pressures by Greece. This move was quite reasonable and expected. This is especially true because Macedonia and the Macedonians were named as Macedonia and Macedonians by Belgrade officially for nearly 50 years during the common federation. Thus, a possible recognition of Macedonia under references or provisional names would be funny, but for a situation in which was Macedonia even tragic if only one of its four neighbors would recognize it under its constitutional name. Therefore this move of Belgrade had exceptional importance for Macedonia.

Thirdly, at the height of the Kosovo crisis and NATO bombing of Serbia, various calculations were made for a possible ground offensive by NATO. Despite the fact that Republic of Macedonia had a powerful Albanian party in the coalition government, despite the fact that it aspired to join NATO, yet it build a very principled position that was also a gesture of friendship towards Serbian people. The position of Macedonia was that it will not allow its territory to be used to attack any of its neighbors.

As a bigger disruption in the relations between Serbia and Macedonia the moment of recognition of the independence of Kosovo by Macedonia together with Montenegro would be emphasized. After this move Belgrade officially reacted by expelling the Macedonian and Montenegrin ambassador from Serbia. Yet re-normalization of relations between the two countries comes relatively quickly.

However, it can be concluded that there are no open questions<sup>20</sup> between both neighbors. Most of Macedonia's infrastructure connections lead through Serbia further on, there is also an economic cooperation, numerous family and friendly connections between ordinary people - citizens of both countries, the dissolution between this two neighbors was done without conflict. All this gives

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<sup>20</sup> If we exclude the problem SOC – MOC, considered as religious problem.

hope and a good basis for improving the future relations between the two neighbors. After all, if Serbia could improve its relations with Croatia and work together on joint projects such as infrastructure connections with the old Yugoslav railway, for instance, then why Macedonia could not promote its relations with Serbia even more? However, the Euro-Atlantic integration of both countries would be the most reliable guarantee of peace in the region and cooperation between the two countries. In this context, both countries as one of the priorities in its foreign policies have the membership in the EU, but it is not the case with joining NATO by Serbia. Serbia's reasons to doubt are understandable. Just few years earlier that alliance bombed Serbia. The refusal to NATO-integration by Serbia in short-term will not have any serious consequences, but in long-term certain consequences are possible to follow.

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