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DOI: 10.2478/cmc-2023-0023

DINAMIKA (OBOROŽENEGA) KONFLIKTA: ALBANSKA MANJŠINA V REPUBLIKI SEVERNI MAKEDONIJI

THE DYNAMICS OF AN (ARMED) CONFLICT: THE ALBANIAN MINORITY IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

Povzetek Makedonija je v devetdesetih letih prejšnjega stoletja veljala za oazo miru na Balkanu, saj je bila edina država razpadle Jugoslavije, kjer ni bilo oboroženega konflikta, kar se je spremenilo leta 2001 s tako imenovano vojno, ki se je končala hitro, tudi zaradi mednarodne intervencije. Oboroženi konflikti se v daljši obliki niso več ponovili, vendar skoraj vsako leto vzniknejo novi, kratek čas trajajoči, nemiri, protesti in incidenti. Članek analizira dinamiko konflikta od nastanka neodvisne Makedonije do danes, ko se Makedonija razvija, tudi na področju integracije manjšine, in v ospredje postavi vzroke spora, ki se ne razrešijo, saj se albanska manjšina številčno krepi, Makedonci, ki pa jih je vse manj, pa spremembe negotovo opazujejo.

Ključne besede ***Oborožen konflikt, albanska manjšina, Severna Makedonija.***

Abstract Macedonia was considered an oasis of peace in the Balkans during the 1990s, as it was the only country of the former Yugoslavia where there was no armed conflict. This changed in 2001 with a so-called “war”, which ended quite quickly, partly thanks to international intervention. Although armed conflicts in the region have not recurred in a prolonged form, almost every year new short-lived disturbances, protests, and incidents arise. This article analyses the conflict’s dynamics from the establishment of independent Macedonia to the present day as North Macedonia continues to develop and implement positive reforms for minority integration. It emphasizes the root causes of the dispute, which remain unresolved, as the Albanian minority is growing in numbers, while Macedonians, whose population is falling, observe the changes with uncertainty.

Key words ***Armed conflict, Albanian minority, North Macedonia.***

Introduction

The Republic of North Macedonia[1] became independent in 1991, after Yugoslavia collapsed. Macedonia was the only ex-Yugoslav state that became independent without any armed conflicts. It was proclaimed an "oasis of peace in the Balkans" and a notable exemplar of peaceful separation and self-determination. This prevailing state of equilibrium, however, underwent a transformative shift in 2001, marked by an upsurge in armed conflicts which persisted until the intervention of NATO. Regrettably, the cessation of hostilities did not herald the end of the discord, as recurrent instances of violence have continued to manifest. The Albanian minority within North Macedonia (the largest in the state) has exhibited steady demographic expansion, whereas the indigenous Macedonian population has demonstrated a regressive trend. According to the 2002 census there were 509,083 Albanians in North Macedonia, or 25% of the population, while unofficial estimates are even higher (Minority Rights, 2023); the number of Albanians continues to grow.

European media and researchers are focused on other issues in this area (mainly Kosovo, but also disputes between Bosnians, Serbs, and Croats) and elsewhere in Europe (Ukraine for example) which are far more threatening at the moment. The post-2001 conflict in Macedonia lacks substantial research in Slovenian or English. Addressing this scholarly gap is essential for a better understanding of the ongoing ramifications of the Macedonian conflict. This research can help us grasp the region's political, social, and ethnic dynamics, benefiting both academia and policymakers in the Balkans and Europe.

This paper employs primary and secondary sources to offer a chronological overview of the conflict. With historical and descriptive approaches, it aims to elucidate the dynamics of this armed conflict while also endeavouring to prognosticate its future trajectories.

1 ANALYSIS OF THE DYNAMICS OF THE CONFLICT

The first part of this section outlines the pre-1991 context, emphasizing Albanian minority rights within former Yugoslavia. The second part provides a concise analysis of the conflict dynamics from 1991 to 2022, based on the Conflict Barometer by HIIK[2] from 1992 onwards[3]. While the conflict remained unaddressed until the

[1] *The nomenclature of the state has undergone alterations since gaining independence. Initially, it was known as the Republic of Macedonia. However, Greece, along with its allies, declined to acknowledge this. Subsequently, the name "The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM)" was employed by Greece and its associates. Greece employed its veto power to block Macedonia's accession to NATO and the EU due to this dispute, a stance that persisted until the Prespa Agreement in 2018. Consequently, in 2019, the nation adopted the name "The Republic of North Macedonia." Throughout this article, I have employed a range of terms, including the widely used "Macedonia," to ensure a comprehensive and contextually relevant presentation.*

[2] *Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research.*

[3] *At times, I have used the term "Conflict Barometer," while on other occasions, "KonfliktBarometer" has been employed. It is important to note that the correct English term is "Conflict," whereas "Konflikt" is of German origin. I introduced this distinction because the initial Barometers, spanning from 1992 to 2001 (with the exception of 1997), were solely available in German. Consequently, all translations from German have been provided by me.*

2001 war, the conflict analysis employs methodology from the Manual for Conflict Analysis by SIDA[4] (SIDA, 2006), focusing on the structural causes, actors, and conflict dynamics (SIDA, 2006, pp 10-12). Additionally, the framework presented by Gray and Martin (2008) is utilized for war comparison, categorizing wars into five main groups: causes/rationales, participants, methods/nature, scale/duration, and outcomes (Gray and Martin, 2008, pp 4-5).

1.1 The pre-1991 context

During the Cold War, Yugoslavia held a prominent position in global politics. Situated uniquely between NATO and the Warsaw pact, it was the only European state to do so. Josip Broz Tito, both a dictator and a unifying figure, played a pivotal role. His policies ushered in an era of peace in the Balkans, fostering a remarkable four-decade period during which people from diverse nations, religions, cultures, and historical backgrounds coexisted harmoniously.

"During the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Albanians were the largest nationality without the status of a nation; they were concentrated in Macedonia and Kosovo. Although Tito introduced a range of measures to protect Albanian identity, including in the fields of education and culture, national grievances persisted. During the late 1980s Albanian protests in Macedonia grew in response to worsening conditions in neighbouring Kosovo. In response, Macedonian authorities clamped down on Albanian educational facilities and other alleged vehicles of Albanian nationalism, including personal names 'which stimulated nationalist sentiment and adherence to the People's Socialist Republic of Albania'. Ethnic Albanians countered these measures with a school boycott in several areas and increasingly violent demonstrations" (Minority Rights Group International, 2008).

The armed conflicts that erupted following the disintegration of Yugoslavia marked the first such conflicts in Europe since 1945, undermining the once-vivid notion of "never again" on the continent. Reports of war crimes, genocide, and violent confrontations between former compatriots were deeply disturbing and alarming. Initially, European and international politics grappled with the appropriate response on the ground, contemplating the deployment of forces. The Balkans took centre stage in global discourse. Subsequently, the United Nations dispatched UNPROFOR[5] to the region.

Macedonia stood out as an "oasis of peace", in contrast to the conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Croatia, and initially even Slovenia. It was widely perceived that the preventive mission had been successful in Macedonia. As Mark Biondich (2011, p 242) put it: "In the absence of deeply ingrained historical myths, resentments, and political elites determined to resolve disputes by violence and ethnic cleansing, and

[4] *Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency.*

[5] *UNPROFOR – United Nations Protection Force, a United Nations peacekeeping force formed in February 1992 and disbanded in March 1995; firstly established for Croatia and then extended to Bosnia and Herzegovina and later to the Republic of Macedonia (UNPROFOR).*

in the light of early and concerted western engagement and mediation, the outcome in Macedonia was considerably better than elsewhere in former Yugoslavia".

The Conflict Barometers (HIIK)[6] recognize the Macedonian government, the Albanian minority, ethnic Macedonians, the UÇK[7], the AKSh[8], Macedonian police and military units, and militant Albanians as parties to the conflict. The conflict is inherently internal in nature; however, since the early 1990s, there have been external influences from international organizations in this region, leading us to categorize this conflict as having been internationalized.

Throughout the history of the previous two centuries, international and religious powers tried to destroy the Macedonian nation. It was the Communist Party of Yugoslavia which first recognized the Macedonians as a nation. Today they are surrounded by Greece (which did not admit the name of Macedonia[9]), Bulgaria (which did not recognize the Macedonians as a nation or even an ethnicity[10]), Kosovo, Serbia and Albania (where ideas about Great Nations live on[11]). Macedonia's existence is threatened by external and internal factors (a growing minority; young people leaving the country) (Mladkovič, 20212).

During the time of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) the Albanians were the largest ethnicity in the state which was not recognized as a nation, and their language was never one of the official ones. In the early 50s and 60s, Ranković proposed to solve the problem of the Albanians by way of forcing the Albanians in Macedonia to recognize themselves as Turks, and to register with the government in Belgrade to emigrate to Turkey (Meier, 1996, p 49). Nevertheless, the position of the Macedonian Albanians was "far better than the position of the Albanians in Kosovo and even most of the Albanians in Albania" (Ramet, 2005, p 225). The Albanians residing in Macedonia faced a distinct situation. They were not readily embraced by Albania, as they had emerged as "free-thinking" citizens within the confines of socialist Yugoslavia, which was notably less rigidly communist than Albania. The Macedonian government, being the most reliant on Belgrade and the least developed

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[6] *From 2001 up to today.*

[7] *Ushtria Çlirimtare Kombëtare - The National Liberation Army, also known as the Macedonian UÇK, was an ethnic Albanian militant, separatist militia which operated in the Republic of Macedonia in 2001 and was closely associated with the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). Following the 2001 Macedonian War, it was disarmed through the Ohrid Framework Agreement, which gave greater rights and autonomy to the state's Macedonian Albanians.*

[8] *Armata Kombëtare Shqiptare - The Albanian National Army is an Albanian paramilitary organization which operates in North Macedonia, Serbia and Kosovo.*

[9] *This changed in 2018 with Prespa agreement. Greece than released its veto against Macedonia joining NATO and EU. However, neither the Greek nor the Macedonian population was satisfied with the agreement, and many protests were held against it.*

[10] *After WW2 Bulgaria first recognized Macedonians as a minority in Bulgaria, but then revoked this decision. In the 1990s Bulgaria was among the first states to recognize the independence of Macedonia; however, it did not recognize the Macedonians as a nation or Macedonian as an independent language (Tatalović, 1999, p 1047).*

[11] *Nationalist and irredentist ideology – a desire, motivated by ethnic reasons, by one state to annex territory belonging to another state.*

within the Yugoslav context, aligned itself with Belgrade's national policies during the 1980s, which often ran counter to the interests of the Albanian population. Regrettably, these actions had detrimental repercussions on the relations between the Macedonian government and the Albanian community in Macedonia). Organized crime has been a longstanding and persistent issue in the region, with a significant portion of Albanians involved. Interestingly, research on smuggling and corruption has revealed that among the elite, ethnicity plays a minimal role, and cooperation between Macedonian and Albanian elites is common (International Crisis Group, 2002, pp 22-23).

2 CONFLICT ANALYSIS

The famous saying, "the Balkans provide more history than they can consume," underscores the region's historical complexity. The Balkans exhibit two prevalent extremist narratives: on the one hand, notions of secession by various national groups, and on the other, aspirations for "Great States"[12] such as Great Serbia, Great Albania, Great Kosovo, and so forth. This diversity of populations coexisting in a compact geographic area often leads to tensions. As long as the idea of a single nation-state remains elusive, conflicts in the Balkans persist. While political solutions can mitigate violence, the presence of extremists can still incite incidents. In areas with disputed territories and an abundance of weapons, the ingredients for war include dire economic circumstances, where individuals have little to lose, and a suitable trigger. This section will demonstrate the dynamics of the conflict from 1991 up to the present day, and it will show that until a nation state, as idealized in the past two centuries, remains the goal of a nation, arguments for this dispute will prevail.

2.1 An oasis of peace (1991-2001)

Macedonia's declaration of independence in 1991 marked a pivotal moment, commonly regarded as the starting point of the conflict, despite the existence of prior disputes, some of which were violent. The Albanian minority residing in Macedonia had already experienced tensions with the Macedonian government before this period. However, it is essential to note that during the era of Yugoslavia the question of ethnicity and the determination of national identity were predominantly addressed in Belgrade, underscoring the evolving dynamics of the region.

The position of the Albanians was more favourable in former Yugoslavia. The emergence of the new borders led to a division among the Albanians; before they had all been living in Yugoslavia, but now they were divided between the Kosovo area in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY[13]), FRY (Prešovo, Medveđa and

[12] *Sometimes also referred to as "Greater".*

[13] *This state was founded on 27 April 1992 as a federation comprising the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Montenegro. In February 2003, it was transformed from a federal republic to a political union, until Montenegro seceded from the union in June 2006, leading to the full independence of both Serbia and Montenegro. Known as Yugoslavia until 2003, the name was then changed from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia to Serbia and Montenegro.*

Bujanovac in Serbia, in the east of Montenegro today) and Macedonia (Grizold and Zupančič, 2008, p 331). A crucial aspect of this situation was their separation from Kosovo, which had significant implications for the Albanian population. Priština was an important city with schools and cultural centres for the Albanian language and culture. Secondly, the Albanians were seen only as a minority in the new state, so their position *de jure* was worsened in some ways from the time of SFRY (Grizold and Zupančič, 2008, p 331); the constitution declared the Republic as a state of Macedonian people and other citizens (Albanians, Turks, Roma people and other ethnic groups) (Pirjevec, 2003, p 587). However, the Albanians were optimistic, and they anticipated substantial improvements in their lives (*de facto* changes). Unfortunately, these changes were either delayed or never materialized, leading to several armed incidents in the following years.

In 1992 the Conflict Barometer noted Macedonia to be "not a recognized state in the international community, but no longer a part of Yugoslavia; an area where tensions are also growing" (HIIK, 1993). However, in 1993 the Barometer recognized the stability of the Macedonian state, particularly because of the UN "blue helmets", although it also noted that Macedonia could still become a problematic area. "A Nordic battalion was deployed at Kjojila, east of Skopje, and a United States contingent of 315 troops arrived in Skopje in early July, deploying to the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia side of the border with the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro) on 20 August 1993" (UNPROFOR). In his report, the Secretary-General concluded that the Force had so far been successful in its preventive mandate in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (UNPROFOR).

From 1993 to 1999 the Conflict Barometers mentioned the conflict with Greece, but not the conflict within the state (with the Albanian minority), despite some violent incidents during this time. There were several violent incidents during the 1990s: a referendum about the autonomy of the Albanian area within Macedonia in 1992; the "separation" of the "Republic of Ilirida[14]" by force (Tatalović, 1999, p 1046); the building of an Albanian University in Tetovo in 1995, and Macedonian protests about it in 1996; and flag disputes in 1997, among others. Slowly changes came: the University was opened, even if the degrees were not recognized everywhere; flags were allowed, and so on. The prevailing sentiment was that the international presence had been effective, and there was a belief that Macedonia would not descend into a new war.

The year 1999 holds significance due to two pivotal events: the NATO intervention in Serbia, and a significant transformation in Macedonia's political system. Both events exerted a substantial influence on the ongoing dispute, and were viewed as catalytic forces propelling the escalation of violence in 2001.

[14] *A proposed state in the western regions of North Macedonia, declared twice by the politician Nevzat Halili, once in 1992 and again in 2014. The proposal was declared unconstitutional by the Macedonian government. The secessionist concept of Ilirida emerged in the early 1990s and was advocated by some Albanian politicians as a solution to the concerns and disputes the Albanian community had with regard to constitutional recognition and minority rights within Macedonia (Balkan Transitional Justice, 2014).*

NATO's 1999 strike on Serbia led to 300,000 Kosovar refugees, increasing the population by 14.77% and intensifying concerns about Macedonian identity (Grizold and Zupančič, 2008, p 332). The Albanian minority perceived the arrival of the Kosovar refugees as a positive development in their relationship with the Macedonian government, embracing them as "brothers and sisters". Meanwhile, the Macedonian population harboured concerns, viewing these refugees as potential recruits for the Kosovo Liberation Army (Grizold and Zupančič, 2008, p 333). The northern region of Macedonia was considered a hub for recruiting UÇK fighters who were engaged in combat against the Yugoslav Army in Kosovo (Grizold and Zupančič, 2008, p 333).

It was said that President Kiro Gligorov had inherited the ability to maintain a delicate balance between the Macedonian population and the Albanian minority, akin to that of the late Marshal Tito (Pirjevec, 2003, p 584). With the end of Gligorov's mandate, Boris Trajkovski assumed the presidency.

The conflict was not mentioned in the 2000 Barometer (HIIK, 2001), despite several incidents having occurred.

Table 1: Conflict dynamic curve

*Since 2003, up to the present day, the Barometer has used 5 levels. In 2001 and 2002 the old Barometer used only 4 levels; the conflict was marked as level 3 in 2001, and as level 2 in 2002 – to keep the levels equivalent I have changed the level intensity for 2001 with regard to the criteria.

Table 2: Conflict analysis 2001 - 2022

Year	Name of the conflict	Conflict intensity	Conflict items	Conflict parties
2001	Macedonia (UÇK)	4	Autonomie (Gleichberechtigung)	UÇK, AKSh vs. Macedonian police units and military forces
2002	Macedonia (UÇK)	2	autonomy, secession	Militant Albanians vs. Macedonian police units
2003	Macedonia (Albanian Minority) / Macedonia (Albanian National Army)	3	autonomy / secession	Government vs. Albanian minority / Government vs. Albanian National Army (ANA)
2004	Macedonia (ethnic groups) / Macedonia (ANA)	3	autonomy / secession	ethnic groups vs. government / Albanian National Army (ANA) vs. government
2005	Macedonia (Albanian minority)	3	secession	Albanian minority vs. government
2006	Macedonia (Albanian minority)	3	secession	Albanian minority vs. government
2007	Macedonia (Albanian minority/ northwestern Macedonia)	3	secession	Albanian minority vs. government
2008	Macedonia (Albanian minority/ northwestern Macedonia)	2	autonomy	Albanian minority vs. government
2009	Macedonia (Albanian minority/ northwestern Macedonia)	2	autonomy	Albanian minority vs. government
2010	Macedonia (Albanian minority/ northwestern Macedonia)	3	autonomy	Albanian minority, NLA vs. government
2011	Macedonia (Albanian minority/ northwestern Macedonia)	1	autonomy	Albanian minority, NLA vs. government
2012	FYROM (Albanian minority)	3	other	Albanian minority vs. ethnic Macedonians
2013	FYROM (Albanian minority)	3	other	Albanian minority vs. ethnic Macedonians
2014	FYROM (Albanian minority)	3	autonomy	Albanian minority vs. ethnic Macedonians
2015	FYROM (Albanian minority)	3	autonomy	Albanian minority vs. government
2016	FYROM (Albanian minority)	1	autonomy	Albanian minority vs. government
2017	FYROM (Albanian minority)	3	autonomy	Albanian minority vs. ethnic Macedonians

Year	Name of the conflict	Conflict intensity	Conflict items	Conflict parties
2018	FYROM (Albanian minority – ethnic Macedonians)	2	subnational predominance	Albanian minority vs. ethnic Macedonians
2019	North Macedonia (Albanian minority – ethnic Macedonians)	2	subnational predominance	Albanian minority vs. ethnic Macedonians
2020	North Macedonia (Albanian minority – ethnic Macedonians)	1	subnational predominance	Albanian minority vs. ethnic Macedonians
2021	North Macedonia (Albanian minority – ethnic Macedonians)	3	subnational predominance	Albanian minority vs. ethnic Macedonians
2022	North Macedonia (Albanian minority – ethnic Macedonians)	3	subnational predominance	Albanian minority vs. ethnic Macedonians

2.2 "War" in Macedonia (2001-2002)

In 2001 conflict went from a latent to a manifest level[15]. On one side were the Macedonian police and military units, while on the other were the UÇK and the AKSh (HIIK, 2002, p 13). Throughout the conflict, Albanian politicians predominantly aligned with the Macedonian government, given the uncertainty surrounding the true sentiments of the Albanian population. Many young boys were forcibly recruited into the ranks of the UÇK. According to the KonfliktBarometer (HIIK, 2002, p 13) this was never a full war but a "limited war", because the number of deaths in the fighting was quite small, around 100. Biondich (2011, p 241) mentioned an even smaller number of 80 casualties, but introduced the bigger problem of 120,000 displaced people. Other sources mention up to 170 000 displaced people, but by 2005 the vast majority of them had returned, apart from around 2,000 ethnic Macedonians and Roma, some of whom remain displaced to this day (Jakov Marusic, 2021).

In February 2001, an agreement on border issues was reached with Belgrade. The most contentious matter concerned the Monastery of Venerable Prohor of Pčinja, situated in Serbian territory but symbolically important to Macedonia. The agreement stipulated that the monastery would remain in Serbian territory while granting Macedonians access to it (Pirjevec, 2003, p 585). Although Arbën Xhaferi, president of the Democratic Party of Albanians, accepted the agreement,

[15] *I had some difficulty in deciding on the level of the conflict in 2001. The KonfliktBarometer (in German) at that time had only 4 levels, so this conflict was at the level of "ernste krise" (serious crisis). However, I decided to put the conflict in 2001 on a scale from 1 to 5, at level 4. This level is "limited war" - there were not just few violent incidents, but the violence was ongoing for some time in a systematic and organized way.*

the Albanian minority felt excluded from the process, intensifying tensions between Macedonians and Albanians. This agreement signified Macedonia's recognition of Serbia's national sovereignty and state border inviolability, thereby acknowledging Kosovo as Serbian territory. The dispute between the two communities deepened as long-held stereotypes persisted, with Macedonians often viewing Albanians as underdeveloped and prone to criminal activities and violence (Pirjevec, 2003, p 586).

Early clashes at the beginning of the year included a "terrorist" attack on a Tetovo[16] village police office, an abduction of journalists by Albanian guerrilla fighters, and the occupation of the village of Tanuševci[17], close to the border with Serbia, by armed individuals linked to UÇK, responding to increased border controls (Pirjevec, 2003, p 588). This posed a security risk for the region, leading to direct confrontations between police forces at the border and resulting in three fatalities (Pirjevec, 2003, p 590). The Kosovo Force (KFOR) and American forces intervened, occupying Tanuševci and securing the border. Macedonian politicians pledged reforms, but rejected constitutional changes or federal transformation. Despite these efforts, the well-organized guerrilla fighters, funded by Albanians in Switzerland, continued their resistance (Pirjevec, 2003, p 591). On March 13, an Albanian political party in Skopje held a peaceful demonstration aligning with the fighters' goals, while a similar event in Tetovo the next day turned violent as armed individuals fired at the police (Pirjevec, 2003, p 591).

The conflict endured in the **Šar** Hills and Tetovo in the north-west. Macedonia deployed 2,000 inadequately trained forces, some with questionable loyalty due to their Albanian nationality. NATO deliberated on intervention, but KFOR's mandate was not extended to Macedonia. Nevertheless, Operation Eagle aimed to secure Kosovo's borders to isolate the "terrorists" (Pirjevec, 2003, p 592).

On March 19, the Macedonian government issued an ultimatum to the fighters: surrender, leave, or face a state of emergency and artillery attacks, with support from Washington, Moscow, the Security Council, and the EU (Pirjevec, 2003, p 592). The ultimatum was rejected, leading to artillery bombardment the next day. A major offensive began on March 25, with dire conditions for civilians used as "human shields" and forced recruitment of young Albanians by guerrilla fighters. The Macedonian army struggled to distinguish between combatants and non-combatants. Approximately 15,000 to 22,000 people fled to Macedonia's interior, Kosovo, Albania, Turkey, or Western Europe (Pirjevec, 2003, p 593).

Although the Macedonian government declared an end to the rebellion in late March, the situation worsened in April. Despite promises of reforms for the Albanian minority and the condemnation of violence by Albanian politicians, resistance from Macedonians led to protests in Skopje. In April, international agreements aimed

[16] *A city in the north-western part of North Macedonia.*

[17] *A village in the northern part of North Macedonia.*

to facilitate Macedonia's path to the EU. Nonetheless, violence persisted, with eight soldiers losing their lives in fights in Vejce. Gezim Ostrensi became UÇK's commander, implementing changes that resulted in guerrilla successes.

Incidents increased, even in Skopje, and a new broad coalition took power on May 14, including parties from the previous opposition, one Albanian, and one Macedonian. The situation worsened when Robert Frowick, the OSCE[18] representative from Washington, held separate talks with the UÇK. Albanian parties also held discussions with Albanian politicians, while Macedonian parties cooperated due to their reliance on international aid. The conflict cost Macedonia $1 million per day, and the EU froze aid until constitutional changes occurred (Pirjevec, 2003, p 596).

Despite promises of reform, the conflict continued, leading to a state of war declaration on June 6. The international community intervened, transferring guerrilla fighters from Aracinovo, which they had occupied, to Kosovo via special buses. This angered the Macedonian population, who saw NATO and the West as aiding the "narco-terrorists". Protests erupted in Skopje, with people occupying the parliament building. The Macedonian government again deployed soldiers to the Tetovo region.

International mediators, including James Pardew, François Léotard, Robert Badinter, and Maximilianus van der Stoel, arrived in Skopje to facilitate negotiations (Pirjevec, 2003, p 598). On August 8, the Framework Agreement for normalization was outlined, and the Ohrid Agreement was signed on August 13. Even Ali Ahmeti, the UÇK's political representative, signed it, despite not being present at the negotiation table. Macedonia's territorial integrity remained, and Albanian demands for minority rights (Albanian language usage in areas with an Albanian population of over 20%, mixed police units, strengthened local administration, a private university in Tetovo (South-Eastern University), and the removal of a constitutional article concerning the Orthodox church's special role in the state) were granted (Pirjevec, 2003, p 598). Other Albanian requests lacking international support were not accepted, with Brussels' assistance contingent on the agreement's implementation.

The violent crisis was resolved by the Ohrid Agreement, but the conflict persisted in a non-violent form in 2002 (HIIK, 2003, p 10). NATO noted ongoing tensions and extended the mandate of Operation Amber Fox[19] (NATO Press Releases 2002).

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[18] *The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.*

[19] *Responding to a request from the Government in Skopje to help mitigate rising ethnic tension, NATO implemented three successive operations in North Macedonia. The operations were conducted from August 2001 to March 2003. First, Operation Essential Harvest disarmed ethnic Albanian groups operating throughout the country. The follow-on Operation Amber Fox provided protection for international monitors overseeing the implementation of the peace plan. Finally, Operation Allied Harmony was launched in December 2002 to provide advisory elements to assist the government in ensuring stability throughout the country. On 17 March 2003, the North Atlantic Council decided to terminate Operation Allied Harmony as of 31 March, and to hand over responsibility for a continued international military presence to the European Union. In April 2002, NATO Headquarters Skopje was created to advise on military aspects of security sector reform; it was downsized in 2012, becoming the NATO Liaison Office (NLO) Skopje, which in turn was formally closed one year after the country's accession to NATO, in March 2021 (NATO, 2023).*

Parliamentary elections brought significant changes to the political system, with the Democratic Union for Integration, led by former UÇK leader Ali Ahmeti, joining the new coalition (HIIK, 2003, p 10).

2.3 After the "war" – a time of two conflicts (2003-2004)

The Conflict Barometers for 2003 and 2004 identify two separate conflicts (HIIK, 2004, p 13; HIIK, 2005, p 12). The first involved the Macedonian Government and the Albanian National Army (AKSh), which escalated to a violent level due to the AKSh's dissatisfaction with the Ohrid Agreement. Numerous bombings targeted government and public institutions (HIIK, 2004, p 13). In the autumn of 2003, AKSh expressed a willingness to negotiate, demanding the release of imprisoned fighters, amnesty for fighters, and the withdrawal of troops from Albanian-inhabited territories. The government rejected this offer and established a 1000-strong special anti-terror force (HIIK, 2004, p 13).

The second conflict was between the Macedonian Government and the Albanian Minority, which remained at a latent level. The government made significant efforts to fulfil its obligations under the Ohrid Agreement. The University of Tetovo was officially granted status on July 17 (HIIK, 2004, p 13). NATO's operation Allied Harmony was succeeded by the EU mission Concordia, consisting of 450 lightly armed soldiers, and late in December it was replaced by the EU police mission Proxima (HIIK, 2004, p 13).

In 2004, the AKSh persisted in its pursuit of a Greater Albania, marked by a missile attack in Bitola on February 8 (HIIK, 2005, p 12). In June, Germany extradited the AKSh leader Idajet Beqiri to Albania, where he received an 18-month prison sentence for promoting ethnic hatred in Tirana (HIIK, 2005, p 12). The second conflict in 2004 escalated to a violent crisis, primarily concerning territorial decentralization, with numerous Macedonian municipalities potentially falling under predominantly Albanian authorities (HIIK, 2005, p 12). The VMRO (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization) called for street protests in July, with approximately 20,000 Macedonians participating, and these protests turned violent.

2.4 Clash of interests over secession (2005-2007)

The conflict between 2005 and 2007 was described as a clash of interests over secession between the government and the Albanian minority, which had its roots in 1991. During this period, the conflict escalated to a violent level. While the situation had improved since the early 2000s, there were still occasional incidents. In 2005, Albanian extremists attacked police stations in Skopje, the capital, and in rural areas of Macedonia with heavy weapons. Several Albanians were sentenced for their involvement in separatist and terrorist activities (HIIK, 2006, p 14). During the summer, the parliament passed a law which granted ethnic Albanians the right to fly the Albanian flag in areas where they constituted the majority (HIIK, 2006, p 14).

In the 2006 elections, shootings occurred, and the situation worsened when Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski chose the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA) to represent the Albanian minority in the coalition instead of the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), which had the majority of Albanian votes (HIIK, 2007, p 14). The DUI leader Ali Ahmeti did not recognize the new government, leading to a few protests in August. However, by September, negotiations had begun, and the situation improved.

A diplomatic quarrel arose when the Prime Minister of Kosovo, Agim Ceku, questioned the legality of the border between Macedonia and Kosovo (HIIK, 2006, p 14). Additionally, reports indicated the discovery of weapons left in the area from the 2001 conflict (SETimes, 2006).

2.5 Towards peace? (2008-2011)

From 2008 to 2011, the central issue in the conflict was autonomy. In 2008, the conflict de-escalated to a non-violent crisis level, despite a political crisis within the Macedonian government. DPA left the coalition, expressing concerns about the rights of ethnic minorities (Grizold and Zupančič, 2008, p 327). Macedonia faced challenges in its NATO and EU aspirations, as it was not invited to the NATO high council meeting in Bucharest, primarily due to Greece's objections. The EU accession talks also suffered setbacks due to election violence and a subsequent parliamentary boycott by ethnic Albanian opposition parties (BBC, 2013).

A significant development affecting minority relations was the recognition of Kosovo's independence in 2008. One year later, the conflict over border demarcation between Macedonia and Kosovo, which had been ongoing since 2001, was resolved. In 2011, the intensity of the conflict reached its lowest point since the war (HIIK, 2012, p 13). A decade after the war, it appeared that despite ongoing regional conflicts, overall the situation was gradually becoming more peaceful. However, that would change in the following year.

2.6 Albanian minority vs. ethnic Macedonians (2012-2014)

In 2012, the conflict quickly intensified into a violent crisis (HIIK, 2013, p 16). Over the next two years, the Conflict Barometers pointed to the primary cause as "other", shifting away from autonomy or separation. However, in 2014, the focus returned to autonomy as the main issue. Notably, in all three years, the main actors in the conflict were recognized as individuals rather than the government or specific forces, marking a significant change in dynamics.

In 2012, a series of violent incidents and protests unfolded, characterized by a cycle of retaliatory actions. Albanians attacked Macedonians, followed by Macedonians attacking Albanians, resulting in casualties on both sides.

During the 2013 elections, which were conducted peacefully and democratically, voters aligned their choices along ethnic lines, with Albanians supporting Albanian parties and Macedonians favouring Macedonian parties (Al Jazeera Balkans, 2013a). Protests in Skopje by both Macedonians and Albanians remained non-violent (Al Jazeera Balkans, 2013b).

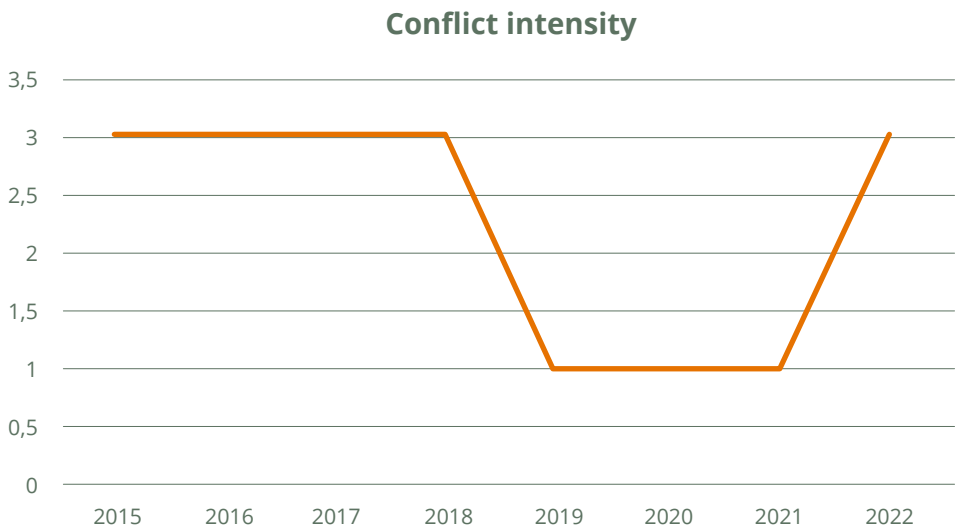
However, the Ohrid Summit of the South-East European Cooperation Process was cancelled because Kosovo was not invited, leading Albania and Croatia to withdraw their participation (Mitrovič, 2013). The return of Johan Tarčulovski[20] from prison in Germany to Macedonia stirred contrasting reactions, with some viewing him as a hero and others as a war criminal (Al Jazeera Balkans, 2013c).

In 2014, while there were a few incidents in Macedonia, international politics, particularly in Europe, faced more significant challenges, notably the war in Donbas. Toward the end of 2014, a new conflict emerged in Macedonia, but this time it was directed against the government.

Table 3: Conflict dynamic curve – FYROM (opposition) / North Macedonia (opposition)

Conflict parties: opposition movement vs. government

Conflict items: system/ideology, national power



[20] *He participated in the conflict in 2001. He was the only Macedonian brought before, convicted, and sentenced by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in The Hague.*

2.7 Protests against the government (2015-2017)

In early May 2015, violent clashes between ethnic Albanian militants and the police in Kumanovo resulted in 22 fatalities. Simultaneously, ongoing protests by a broad opposition movement against the government eventually led to early elections in January 2016 (HIIK, 2016, p 42). The conflict revolved around national power and the orientation of the political system, with Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski's government facing off against the opposition movement in a violent crisis. Various social groups engaged in protests throughout the year, calling for political changes, Gruevski's resignation, and an end to corruption (HIIK, 2016, p 47).

Starting in 2015, the Conflict Barometer began distinguishing between two separate conflicts: the long-standing one since 1991, primarily concerning the Albanian minority, and a newer one against the government that began in 2014. Protests against the government, calls for change, and political clashes escalated into violence, prompting EU-mediated talks between the government and the opposition. Following an EU-brokered agreement, Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski resigned in January 2016. However, a legislative change which resulted in the pardon of several high-ranking officials suspected of electoral fraud, including Gruevski, led to nationwide protests from April onwards (HIIK, 2017, p 32). The dispute involving the Albanian minority receded to its lowest level, but a new challenge emerged in Europe, particularly in the Balkans: the refugee crisis.

2.8 Towards subnational predominance (2018-2022)

Beginning in 2018, the central theme of the conflict shifted towards subnational predominance[21], leading to a decrease in violent incidents during that year. Nevertheless, protests continued to take place in Macedonia. A significant development occurred after 27 years of contention, with North Macedonia and Greece signing a historic agreement to rename the country the Republic of North Macedonia. This diplomatic achievement put an end to the conflict between these two states in 2019, although it sparked week-long protests by opposition groups in both nations, resulting in occasional outbreaks of violence (HIIK, 2019, p 37).

Despite the opposition to the name deal in both countries, the Greek parliament ratified the Prespa agreement on January 25, 2019. Subsequently, North Macedonia's accession to NATO, using its new name, was signed in an accession protocol, and the country officially became part of NATO in 2020. The aspiration to join both NATO and the EU had always been a shared goal among Macedonia's Macedonian and Albanian populations.

The situation with regard to the Albanian minority in Macedonia remained peaceful in 2020, possibly due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which kept most of the population

[21] *Subnational predominance focuses on the attainment of de facto control by a government, a non-state organization or a population over a territory or a population (HIIK 2018, 6).*

confined to their homes. However, in the following years, 2021 and 2022, the conflict level increased once again.

On 24 June 2022, Bulgaria's parliament approved the lifting of the country's veto on opening EU accession talks with North Macedonia. In July 2022, North Macedonia's Assembly approved a French proposal requiring constitutional changes to recognize a Bulgarian minority, safeguard minority rights, and introduce hate speech laws for EU accession talks. On July 6, protests against the proposal made in Skopje led to violent clashes between ethnic Macedonians and Albanians. The demonstrations ended on July 16 after the Assembly approved the proposal, facilitating EU accession talks (HIIK, 2023, p 47).

Conclusion

The historical conflict curve in Macedonia, marked by periods of violence and relative peace, highlights the persistent nature of the issues surrounding the Albanian minority and their demands for increased rights. The ongoing demographic growth of the Albanian population within the country could further fuel these demands. This demographic shift could contribute to a perception among the Macedonian population that they are at risk of becoming a minority within their own country, leading to heightened concerns and fears. Fear can indeed be a potent factor in fuelling and prolonging conflicts, as it can lead to tensions and exacerbate existing disputes.

The economic challenges in Macedonia, including unemployment and a significant number of young Macedonians seeking better opportunities in the European Union, could contribute to social tensions and frustrations. The overrepresentation of Albanians in the unemployed population could also be a source of concern, particularly in a multi-ethnic society. Additionally, economic challenges could amplify issues related to corruption and organized crime, high levels of which can undermine trust in institutions, exacerbate social inequalities, and contribute to insecurity. While the disarmament efforts by NATO and the Macedonian police following the 2001 conflict were significant, it is not uncommon for people to still possess weapons, as indicated by the relatively high number of Macedonians reported to own firearms (Al Jazeera Balkans, 2013d). This prevalence of weapons could be a factor in perpetuating a culture of violence and could potentially escalate tensions during periods of social unrest or political turmoil.

Certainly, there have been significant developments in Macedonia, some of which are positive. Joining NATO, making Albanian a co-official language, and launching negotiations for EU accession are notable accomplishments. Additionally, increased representation of Albanians in politics and public life is a positive step towards inclusivity. However, it is worth noting that debates about positive discrimination policies may also lead to certain challenges and concerns. In the Balkans, notions

of Great Nation-States still persist. Nation-state building[22] began in Europe after the French revolution, and during the following centuries there were many disputes about it, and many casualties. Although at the end of the 20th century it seemed that in the spirit of globalization and neoliberalism nation-states were losing their significance, the situation has changed again in the 21st century, and countries, even within the EU, are again strengthening their national policies. Until understanding of the state, based on the nation-state ideas (one nation, one state) overcome, this conflict, and many more will remain present[23]. A significant influence within this understanding of the state is also exerted by religion – identifying with the nation, and therefore the state, implies sharing the same faith. In the dispute in question, the decreasing population of Macedonians (and therefore their religion, Orthodox Christianity) within their own sovereign state, alongside the rising number of Albanians (and therefore Islam) and the persistent influence of fear (of losing a nation state, which was finally achieved), makes a resolution within the conventional nation-state model seem unattainable. As Andonov and Ilieva (2022, p 101) proposed: "Is there a need for redefinition in the modern concept and renewal of the North Macedonian nation based on new principles?"

Since 2001, the situation in Macedonia has generally been peaceful enough for national forces to manage without the need for international intervention. The overall state of peace in the Balkan region is an improvement from the turbulent 1990s, but it is important to acknowledge that peace is never a constant condition.

This paper underscores a significant point about the 1990s: despite sporadic violent incidents, the conflict in Macedonia was not even mentioned in the Conflict Barometer. It is worth noting that the Barometer's precision and comprehensiveness were not as advanced then as they are today. Nevertheless, at that time, Macedonia was often perceived as an "oasis of peace," and the outbreak of war was not anticipated.

In the current global context, while the world is grappling with other conflicts in Europe and beyond, it is vital to remain vigilant and keep a close watch on developments in Macedonia and the Balkans to ensure that peace endures.

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[22] *As a political ideal, nationalism aspires to a congruence between state borders and the boundaries of the national community, so that the national group is contained in the territory of its state and the state contains only that nation. However, in reality, the borders of states and the boundaries of nations usually only partially overlap: not all the residents of the state belong to the core national group (sometimes not even all the citizens are part of the nation), and some members of the nation reside in other states. The lack of congruence between state and nation has given rise to several phenomena: wars that break out at approximately the time of nation-state formation; citizenship regimes (see below Citizenship in nation-states) which embrace co-national immigrants—i.e. immigrants belonging to the same nation—but exclude other immigrants; efforts by nation-states to nationalize additional territories and populations; and state policies that manage ethnic, religious, and national diversity within their borders (Feinstein, 2023).*

[23] *Conflict, the crux of it, persists, and our only solution is peacekeeping.*

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