

# **Stabilizing Relations Between Ethnic Macedonians and Ethnic Albanians in Macedonia**

*By Victor Bivell*

The relationship between ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians in the Republic of Macedonia has been a source of concern for many years, but it is unlikely to be resolved by ad hoc or piecemeal concessions by either side. What is required is a Government policy that will ease the tensions permanently.

While similar minority problems exist in many countries, the source of ongoing tension in Macedonia is twofold: the large size of the ethnic Albanian minority, and the rising proportion of ethnic Albanians to ethnic Macedonians in the general population. Both these factors contribute to unstable power relations between the two groups. Thus any solution to the problem must address the issue of population balance.

However, the policy positions on minorities adopted by other Balkan countries: denial of the existence of minorities, understating minority population numbers, overt and covert ethnic cleansing strategies, are not appropriate and are rightly condemned.

There are many other policy options that can achieve stability and that are based on acceptable international human rights norms and concessions from both ethnic groups.

## **What is at stake**

For ethnic Macedonians, Macedonia is their long sought after and only homeland - the one place on Earth where they can fully enjoy their culture and develop it freely. This feeling is shared by ethnic Macedonians in Macedonia and by the relatively large Macedonian diaspora. Thus the preservation of Macedonia as the Macedonian homeland, as stated in the Constitution, is paramount.

For ethnic Albanians, the issue has at least three perspectives: one group of Albanians is content to the extent that they choose to live in Macedonia rather than in Albania and Kosovo, for a second group the issue is about greater human rights in Macedonia, and for a third group it is about the expansion of Albanian controlled territory.

From the Macedonian perspective, the Albanian desire for more rights must be seen in the wider Balkan context. Macedonia argues that the Albanian minority in Macedonia enjoys far greater rights than other ethnic minorities in the Balkans, and that these rights far exceed the human rights of ethnic Macedonians in Albania, Greece and Bulgaria, and also far exceed the human rights of all ethnic minorities in Albania and Kosovo, for example.

It is also true that Albanians, like Macedonians, are among the more than 200 privileged nations in the world which have their own homeland. Any ethnic Albanian who seriously feels they lack human rights need only travel the very short distance to Albania, a choice which the many hundreds of ethnic groups without a homeland do not have.

Macedonians see that ethnic Albanians have a homeland in Albania - as is clearly stated in the Constitution of Albania - and that no one is asking them to relinquish this. They also see Albanian demands for changes to the Macedonian Constitution as attempts to de-Macedonianize Macedonia - that Albanians are demanding that Macedonians give up their human right to have a homeland, something which Albanians are not being asked to do. In this situation, who is oppressing whom?

Thus ethnic Albanian demands for human rights are weakened by the strong elements of hypocrisy and political opportunism.

The solution to this is the granting of equal rights to the Macedonian minority in Albania, so that the rights of the two minority groups - ethnic Albanians in Macedonia and ethnic Macedonians in Albania - can advance together and equally.

Meanwhile, it is the third group of ethnic Albanians, the territorial expansionists, who are the most serious ongoing threat to stability.

The Albanian minority has claimed that it respects the territorial integrity of Macedonia, but the recent terrorist offensives in Tetovo and Kumanovo in north west Macedonia by organized ethnic Albanian military groups was widely seen among the international community and within Macedonia as an illegal and undemocratic attempt to gain territory.

The ability to mount a military offensive and the support given to that offensive are also indicative of the increasing power of the Albanian minority.

Even if Macedonia were to concede to Albanian minority demands for greater rights and changes to the Constitution, there is no guarantee that the Albanian minority's demands would end there. The terrorist offensive shows that these demands are likely to continue at least until territory is conceded to the ethnic Albanians.

It is also certain that these demands will increase, not decrease, as the Albanian minority increases its proportion within the total Macedonian population.

Thus Albanian minority claims that they do not seek to annexe territory are insufficient. A mere verbal or written statement by ethnic Albanians that they will preserve Macedonia will never satisfy the Macedonian public and diaspora.

### **Policy of National Stability**

This has placed the Macedonian Government under pressure to find a solution that preserves both Macedonia as a homeland for the Macedonian people and ethnic stability within the country.

To achieve these, the Government needs to make it clear that the Albanian minority has to be prepared to offer more than verbal comfort. They also need to make real concessions that will prove their bona fides and achieve national stability.

These concessions should be based on the core issue for ethnic Macedonians - stabilizing the

intercommunity relations by stabilizing the ethnic Macedonian and ethnic Albanian populations in Macedonia.

The Macedonian State Statistical Office shows the following dramatic rise in the ethnic Albanian population, from 12.5 per cent in 1953 to 22.7 per cent 1994. Much of this was due to immigrants from Kosovo during the 1960s and 70s when Macedonia and Kosovo were both part of Yugoslavia.

POPULATION STRUCTURE ACCORDING TO DECLARED ETHNIC AFFILIATION, BY CENSUSES

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year	1953	1961	1971	1981	1991 1)	1994 2)
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
Macedonian	66	71.2	69.3	67	65.3	66.6
Albanian	12.5	13	17	19.8	21.7	22.7
Turkish	15.6	9.4	6.6	4.5	3.8	4
Roma	1.6	1.5	1.5	2.3	2.6	2.2
Vlach	0.7	0.6	0.4	0.3	0.4	0.4
Serb	2.7	3	2.8	2.3	2.1	2.1
Others	1	1.4	2.3	3.8	4.1	2

Stabilizing the population proportions would provide comfort to the ethnic Macedonians in Macedonia and in the diaspora that their homeland is not being gradually lost from within, and in doing so provide a more conducive environment for the favourable consideration of advances in human rights and economic circumstances for all minorities in Macedonia, including the ethnic Albanian minority.

As part of developing a long term solution, the Macedonian Government should formulate and articulate a clear Policy of National Stability that addresses this issue. It should then implement a set of policies to achieve this based on a two fold strategy of increasing ethnic Macedonian numbers, principally through encouraging ethnic Macedonians to return to or migrate to Macedonia, and secondly stabilizing ethnic Albanian numbers utilizing a selection of internationally accepted means.

The policy should guarantee political and ethnic stability within the country while also preserving the human rights of the ethnic Albanians.

The policy should be based entirely on voluntary and individual choice and positive incentives and should scrupulously avoid any suggestion of coercion or untoward forcefulness.

The method of implementation is crucial. The so called "voluntary" population exchanges between Greece and Turkey and Greece and Bulgaria in the 1920s – which involved hundreds of thousands of ethnic Macedonians as well as Greeks, Turks and Bulgarians – were humanitarian catastrophes that have forever given such government controlled

population measures a bad name. But the agreement between Macedonia and Turkey in the 1960s for the return of Muslim Turks to Turkey appears to have been a much more successful exercise proving that such a policy can work if it is the right policy and implemented well.

One option that does not appear to be workable in the current situation is that of separating the predominantly Albanian region of Macedonia from the predominantly Macedonian region including as part of a land swap between Albania and Macedonia. Such a separation worked well for Czechoslovakia when it became the Czech Republic and Slovakia, but two factors make it difficult in Macedonia: it would clearly reward the aggression of the Albanian separatists, sending the wrong signal to the many other Balkan minorities, and the Macedonians in the Albanian majority region are clearly against it.

## **Implementation**

What is the optimum balance between the ethnic groups that will ease tensions and generate stability? Many countries struggle with this issue, and perhaps there is no definitive answer to such a difficult, value-based question.

One option is to nominate a target: for example a long term target of returning the ethnic Macedonian proportion of the total population to its 1961 level of 71.2 per cent.

A second option is simply to increase the proportion of ethnic Macedonians incrementally until stability is achieved.

Either way, the desired level of stability would need to be achieved by policy measures that encourage an increase in ethnic Macedonian numbers.

There are numerous acceptable policy options available for further consideration that can achieve this.

### **Policy Options to Increase the Ethnic Macedonian Population:**

1. Incentives to encourage ethnic Macedonians to form families and to have larger families.
2. Measures to discourage migration by ethnic Macedonians.
3. Incentives to encourage the return of expatriate ethnic Macedonians, including those from Tetovo, Kumanovo and north west Macedonia.
4. Incentives to encourage the migration to Macedonia of ethnic Macedonians from the diaspora who were born outside of Macedonia. The diaspora is a massive resource that can assist Macedonia in the same way that the large scale immigration of Russian Jews in the 1990s assisted Israel, and the Pontian Greeks in the 1920s assisted Greece. Strategies could include a government appeal and financial incentives.
5. A longer term program to encourage young ethnic Macedonians in the diaspora to consider living in Macedonia. For example, one target group could be single people who have at least one parent who is ethnic Macedonian. The program could provide free or subsidized housing

for a set period, for example up to one year, and a refund on travel expenses to Macedonia, while they either study, work, seek work, set up a business or other approved activity. The young people could be housed in the same complex to encourage friendships and integration.

### **Conclusion**

The list is not exhaustive and there are numerous other policy options that can be explored.

Such a program, if implemented within all the accepted international human rights norms, should satisfy ethnic Albanians by providing desirable economic and other opportunities, and a better climate for improved human rights.

For ethnic Macedonians, it will guarantee that they will preserve their only homeland, demonstrate the bona fides of the ethnic Albanians in Macedonia, and create a safe climate in which human rights can advance for all citizens.

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