



NENAD VUKOSAVLJEVIĆ

# EXPLORATORY TRIP TO MACEDONIA

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Exploratory trip to Macedonia

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## Introduction

Exploratory trip in Macedonia in the period November-December 2000 was conducted by Ivana Franovic and Nenad Vukosavljevic from the Centre for Nonviolent Action Sarajevo.

The exploratory trip had the following goals:

- To analyse the political situation in the country
- To explore the needs of groups active in the area of peace building, conflict transformation and inter-ethnic relations
- To proof the possibilities of intensifying training-work in the triangle Serbia-Kosovo-Macedonia, through the opening of an additional CNA office in Macedonia

The political situation in neighbouring Serbia has drastically changed in-between the time of planning and implementing the exploratory trip to Macedonia. Newly established acting space within Serbia/Yugoslavia enables activities in the area of peace building and civil society development that have been unthinkable until recently.

## Political Situation in Macedonia

### Inter-ethnic relationships, Democracy, Human Rights

The political situation in Macedonia, Kosovo and Serbia has been the theme of all the talks, which were held during our visits to various organisations and the contacts with others. The views on the current political state of affairs and the work direction of the present Macedonian government are very different, although two major, each other opposing, points of view can be identified. Simplified, one can claim the existence of a Macedonian and Albanian perception of causes for the disturbed inter-ethnic relationships, which is considered an undeniable fact. Both points of view identify the opposing side as the only one

responsible for and guilty of the current situation. In-between there are few people which have analysed the situation and found their own responsibility to act towards understanding and the establishment of communication between both sides.

Macedonia is a divided country: the West of the country at the border with Kosovo and Albania is populated by a majority of ethnic Albanians; in the rest of the country ethnic Macedonians represent a majority. Besides these two major ethnic groups there are various other ethnic groups living in Macedonia: Turks, Slavic Muslims, Serbs, Roma, Gorani, Bulgarians and Vlachs. Generally one can say that these national minorities share the view of the Macedonian „side“. In the Capital City of Skopje, the Albanian minority is strongly present making up already a quarter of the total population. The regional centre of Albanians in Macedonia is the town of Tetovo, west of Skopje. Albanians make up two thirds of Tetovo population. Tetovo University, which offers high education in Albanian language, has an unclear legal status, not being funded by the government and its graduate certificates not being recognised. In our exploratory trip, CNA has paid special attention to areas, which have ethnically mixed population and therefore represent a focus point of ethnic tensions. Those are the towns of: Skopje, Tetovo, Gostivar and Debar.

The total number of people of Albanian origin in Macedonia is unknown and controversial. While official numbers claim 25% of Albanian population, unofficial estimates are 30-35%. Altogether there are about two million people living in Macedonia. A census should be undertaken in 2001. The difference between official and unofficial data may be explained by an extensive problem of statelessness in Macedonia. After disintegration of former Yugoslavia, of which Macedonia was a member republic, Macedonian authorities have denied the right to citizenship and Macedonian documents to many people. Those affected by denial of citizenship are foremost Albanians who lived in Macedonia, but have not been included in census 1991 or those who have been born in Kosovo or other parts of former Yugoslavia, no matter of their decades of residency in Macedonia. About 120 000 people are affected, claim Albanian sources. As a consequence of this they have: no right to vote, to social insurance, to Macedonian documents (usually just travel documents for stateless) and therefore no right to participate in the political life of the society. Their citizenship requests are being rejected without explanation, with a notice about discretionary right of police to lay open their reasons. In many cases one member of the family has no citizenship, whereas the others have. Children of stateless persons born in Macedonia also remain stateless. This hard discrimination act probably has a goal of reducing the political influence of Albanians living in Macedonia, though creating a fertile ground for political extremism.

Political movement of Albanians in Macedonia is organised in two political parties, the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA), a member of the governing coalition and the Party of Democratic Progress (PDP) which used to be a member of former government. The major goal of both parties is the recognition of constitutional equal rights of Albanians in Macedonia. The legalisation of Albanian language as official language, the state financing of Tetovo University and the adjustment of percentage of Albanians in state service, according to their percentage in total are just single steps towards the goal of constitutional recognition of Albanians in Macedonia.

The percentage of Albanians is constantly rising due to the high birth rate. This can be explained with the lack of education and traditionally strong patriarchal family structures. High birth rate is connected with poverty, low economy growth, high unemployment and finally the demotivation of parents to finance education of their children. The educational trend of the 80s has been reversed in the 90s, because people who received high education remained unemployed and have consequently been demotivated to invest in the education of their children.

In ethnically mixed areas, as for example in Tetovo, two parallel societies exist beside each other. Streets are clearly divided in Albanian and Macedonian ones. Particularly in the evening it appears to be a rule not to enter premises which belong to the „others“. It goes as far that people reject stepping into a cafe or restaurant of the „others“. Lectures in school are divided in Albanian and Macedonian through time shifts, so that neither teachers nor pupils, who use the same school premises, ever get in contact with each other, studying in their own mother tongue respectively. Violence escalates regularly, as recently on 28<sup>th</sup> November 2000, the Day of Albanian Flag, as Albanian pupils hanged down the Macedonian flag off the school building and put up an Albanian one. In respond to that, Macedonian pupils boycotted the lectures and organised demonstrations, so that dangerous confrontation of pupils was hardly kept under control, divide by police cordons.

Hatred and mistrust are ruling the country. The situation has similarities with the situation in Kosovo at the beginning of 90s, between Kosovo Serbs and Albanians. It is to be mentioned that the situation in Kosovo is followed with great interest. While Albanians in Macedonia feel solidarity with Albanians in Kosovo, many Macedonians fear that a similar scenario may take place in Macedonia in order to separate West Macedonia and merge it into Great Albania.

The current governing coalition is made up of extreme nationalist party of VMRO-DPMNE and their Albanian extreme nationalistic counterpart, DPA. This constellation reminds us of coalition of Bosniak, Croat and Serb nationalists in

Bosnia-Herzegovina, that governed the country before the war and started the war itself. Many media reports tell of corruption affairs in the government indicating criminal practice agreements concerning smuggling of cigarettes, drugs and weapons. Clear proofs have not been presented as yet.

Only few years ago, at VMRO rallies one could spot slogans as „Albanians into gas chamber!“, whilst DPA has been playing with thoughts of Great Albania. Therefore it seems unbelievable that the coalition of these two parties has been excellently functioning for two years. Majority of Albanians in Macedonia is mainly satisfied with the government's achievements so far, as some steps towards equalisation of status of Albanians with Macedonians have been done. On the other hand, the majority of Macedonians is scared of this development. The slow but sure change of ethnic balance in Macedonia scares Macedonian population extremely. One can hear statements as: „They will take away everything from us.“ «They will become majority here and make our country a part of Great Albania“.

Some of our discussion partners have the opinion that democracy development has been reversed under the new government. Local elections in 2000 have had various irregularities, pointing out at attempts of election fraud. The great defeat of the governing party VMRO during the first round of local elections, has been miraculously reversed in the second round (in Skopje about 100 000 votes for the opposition were „not casted“ in the second round). Independent election monitors reported of various physical attacks, false identification documents and similar.

In all parts of Macedonia there are claims of ruling party corruption and abuse of authority in favour of single political parties. This is also reported to be a reversed political development trend and perceived as a burning issue. Although the previous government lost the elections because of their numerous corruption affair involvements, it is now being described, in comparison to VMRO, as less corrupt. In the town of Gostivar, populated with 95% of Albanians, an NGO activist claimed that especially West Macedonia is, now after the fall of Milosevic regime, the last dictatorship bastion in the Balkans.

All major parties of the political scene have been or are currently part of the government, therefore all are connected with corruption. There is no recognisable alternative to the nationalistic course of both sides. Oppositional parties are also using nationalistic rhetoric, that appears to be a safe tool in the fight for power.

Some government moves have been faced with approval of the Albanian population, because they are seen as steps towards recognition of equal rights. This policy is being insufficiently presented and explained to the public, so the Macedonian part of the population has small acceptance and understanding of it.

Moreover, fear is growing among Macedonians. Instead of leading a public debate and searching for support of citizens and their initiatives, small government circles are making and implementing decisions, hoping that glorifying tones of state TV will convince the public of their success. The lack of democracy and the culture of dialogue is threatening to turn steps which could contribute to stabilisation into a major violent setback in the future, possibly at next general elections.

Existing Initiatives in the areas:

Peace, Conflict Transformation, Inter-ethnic Communication  
and Regional Cooperation

There are only few organisations and initiatives that gather Albanian and Macedonian activists. Ethnically divided, the NGO scene seems to be focussing on differently defined goals. Hence, most Macedonian organisations that do some inter-ethnic work, describe their goals as „education for loyal citizens“. Under these terms, assimilation is being considered and hardly any space left for joint efforts in the creation of common future. Albanian organisations, on the other hand, are mainly focussing on advocacy for their own rights, which are indeed in many ways unfulfilled. There are hardly any cases of solidarity across ethnic borderlines. A feeling of fear and discrimination is shared among Macedonians in areas where they are a minority. Only few people have the awareness of sharing the society they live in with others, and being responsible to further the social transformation process through dialogue.

Obstacles for initiatives that wish to engage in sincere inter-ethnic dialogue, are certainly present within the surrounding environment, which may exert pressure and create fear. Besides this, NGOs are usually afraid of local authorities, which may use tools in their hands to act against those groups, who dare criticise them or pursue politically opposed goals. Questioned about the legal regulations concerning NGO work, many of our discussion partners told us that there are no problems. During our visit at the only organisation in Tetovo, to our knowledge, that employes both nationalities and does inter-ethnic work with children, we asked our host whether they could somehow intervene in ongoing troubles between high-school pupils. The person answered that they do not dare do that, because they would immediately feel the power of local authorities through intense financial control and otherwise. Similar to Bosnian NGO



regulations, Macedonian ones are also stuffed with bureaucratic forms and limitations, that force NGOs to use „creative“ bookkeeping in order to meet the legal requirements. The practice is known to the authorities and tolerated up to the point that someone needs to be threatened.

There are some initiatives that focus on inter-ethnic meetings of youth and children, designing those meetings with more or less recreative and educational contents. These meetings are held in Macedonian language, that almost all Albanians speak, as hardly any Macedonians understand or speak Albanian language. These activities are very valuable, offering unique opportunities for people of different ethnic origin to get to know each other and communicate.

In the area of conflict transformation, we met a single group that is the Ethnic Conflict Resolution Project - ECRP, from Skopje, which does Trainings in Conflict Transformation. The group gathers both Macedonians and Albanians, who work as trainers with ethnically mixed groups of youth from high schools. In this case, the activities go beyond meetings and educate participants in nonviolent communication, conflict resolution, dealing with prejudice and difference, etc. Nevertheless, this group has rather limited capacity with only 4 Trainers. CNA has brought this group in contact with our participants from the Training for Trainers and besides this agreed on terms of future cooperation. The cooperation should enclose attendance of ECRP staff and former participants to our training courses and visits of ECRP trainers as guest trainers at CNA events.

A particular problem seems to be the orientation of NGOs towards concrete projects. This means that very few NGOs have a clearly designed mission and strategy. Most of them create project proposals in the moment when Donors announce advertisements for implementing partners in a specific area of work. Hence, donors define strategy of civil society development and work priorities instead of authentic local activist initiatives. As a result of such practice, many groups were formed based on financial interest and without activist motivation. Occasional practice of NGOs connection with political parties, whose policies they advocate, draws an even darker picture.

There are basically no local initiatives that concentrate their work on the wider region, beyond Macedonia. Burning problems within Macedonia probably contribute to such orientation. Despite that, some of the people we spoke to/discussed with expressed interest in joining regional activities and profiting from cross-border experience exchange.

## Conclusions

### *Capacity building*

Existing capacities in Macedonia appear insufficient. Some of the initiatives founded within the past 1-2 years offer potential for capacity development. Nevertheless, these groups need in the first place training and structural support themselves.

The education of multipliers deserves particular attention.

Despite the lack of awareness about the need for regional, cross-border work, we estimate it important for Macedonian participants to be included in regional activities.

### *Meeting Point Macedonia*

Macedonia can be used as a neutral meeting point for people from Kosovo and Serbia. Meeting and training work in conflict transformation can concentrate on these three regions including minorities respectively. The exchange may get additional quality and ease likely ethnic confrontation between Albanians on one side and Serbs and Macedonians on the other, through inclusion of participants from Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro. Similar conflict lines, but partly different ways of their expression and development stages, offer a rich background for necessary constructive confrontation and conflict transformation.

Contacts with organisation gathering ethnic Albanians from Macedonia offer easier access to Albanian organisations in Kosovo. These contacts have been made during the exploratory trip and therefore a precondition for improvement of contacts to Kosovo has been achieved. Due to many prejudices and recent terrible events in the region, it is particularly difficult for people of Serb origin to get in contact with Albanians and the other way around. Grave security circumstances in Kosovo make it very dangerous for native Serbo-Croat-Bosnian speakers to travel through Kosovo.

### *Language barrier*

Native Serbo-Croat-Bosnian speakers understand Macedonian language and the other way around. Workshops that CNA conducted in Skoplje and Tetovo confirm this, although language difficulties have occurred sometimes. In particular young people of Albanian origin needed translation occasionally, as they never learned Serbo-Croat-Bosnian language in school, as it was practice previously.

### *Training need*

The need for inter-ethnic work in Macedonia is very big. Trainings in nonviolent conflict transformation with themes: nonviolent and intercultural communication, team-work, dealing with difference, national identity, prejudice, gender; are perceived by CNA as needed in order to initiate and enhance the communication process at different levels of the Macedonian society.

To our knowledge, there is no Training for Trainers in nonviolent conflict transformation in Macedonia. Some activists have taken part in educational courses outside the country, primarily in USA and Scandinavia. Criticism about these courses concerned mainly the non-adjustment of curricula and the non-applicability to the settings of their local environment.

There are only few brochures in Macedonian and Albanian language, which can be considered as literature concerning conflict transformation. CNA met a high demand for our training Manual „Nonviolence?“, as there is no comparable literature in either of the languages.

Strengthening of NGO capacities through NGO management deserves also attention, since there are some international agencies and groups concentrating on this area. Some local groups are already offering trainings in NGO Management and work on networking and information exchange.

### *Strategy Recommendation*

A group residing in Macedonia has various possibilities of contributing to peace building. Nevertheless, because of public acceptance there are some possibilities that can be recommended. It could be an initiative that gathers:

- Macedonians and Albanians , with or without additional activists of other ethnic origin, that have conflict transformation as a focus of their work
- Only Macedonians, working with Macedonians on issues of prejudice reduction, hence creating preconditions for further inter-ethnic work
- Only Albanians, working with Albanians on issues of prejudice reduction, hence creating preconditions for further inter-ethnic work

A potential CNA office in Skopje should necessarily gather trainers from Macedonia from both main ethnic groups, beside two activists from CNA Sarajevo (Serbian and Serbian-Montenegrin origin) - who would help build up the office. Due to our knowledge there are only few Macedonian trainers that could get engaged and no Albanians. A contribution to trainers education and capacity building can be pursued also from outside Macedonia.

Goal definition should foremost enclose the education of trainers of Albanian and Macedonian origin. Lack of capacity appears apparent in Kosovo and Serbia, which are having similar problems and conflicts. Regional focus of the work demands cross-border cooperations which could, thanks to CNA Sarajevo's experience, be successfully done when the initiative is carried out by educated activists of various ethnic origin. Communication barriers and prejudice can be overbridged more easily with such a set up. The high priority of CNA should be support of local initiatives that wish to work on improving inter-ethnic relationships in Macedonia, Kosovo and Serbia.

Political changes in Serbia have opened totally new space for action. Two activists from CNA Sarajevo, who should pursue the extension and intensification of work in the triangle Serbia-Kosovo-Macedonia, could do the following:

- ?? To develop regional training work in the triangle Serbia-Kosovo-Macedonia, hence responding to numerous training requests from Serbia and Macedonia.
- ?? To act as a local initiative within Serbia, contributing to the development of a culture of dialogue, demilitarisation, communication with neighbouring regions and co-initiate the reconciliation process through dealing with the recent violent past.

Opening an office in Belgrade/Serbia as an authentic local initiative, gathering activists from Serbia (current CNA Sarajevo staff), including further activists of non-Serbian origin (useful because of public acceptance), appears as a possible response to the current situation. Unthinkable, until recently, this possibility has become realistic through the revolution in Serbia.

The main goal of the Belgrade Centre should be furthering of training work in nonviolent conflict transformation in the Balkan region. Trainings should, at this stage, take place in Macedonia or Montenegro, including participants from Serbia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia. Contacts in Macedonia should be used for improvement of the contact net in Kosovo and reaching out to those activists there who need such training.

An additional dimension of the Centre in Belgrade should be public acting, practice and advocacy of the culture of dialogue and the overcome of the culture of violence in Serbia itself. Future political agreements and solutions to the question of Kosovo's status, clarification of minority status, demilitarisation, will only be possible if there is a broad acceptance by citizens of them. Such acceptance within the population can be reached only through multi-level public work and the process of opening up taboo themes in society. Those are the preconditions for a sustainable Peace and Democracy development.

CNA Belgrade could give a strong contribution in capacity building, through trainers education in the area Macedonia-Kosovo-Serbia. Contacts and knowledge of the situation gathered during the exploratory trip in Macedonia are needed preconditions for an efficient choice of partner organisations and well targeted development of human resources there. Gathered knowledge is already been of benefit in the work of the CNA Sarajevo office.

In order to secure efficient regional work, an exploratory trip within Serbia is to be recommended. An exploratory trip in Kosovo is recommendable also, as far as the security situation there allows free movement for Non-Albanians.