


**Conflict Studies Research Centre**



**Macedonia -  
Recognition, Referendum,  
Resignation**

**James Pettifer**

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## **Key Points**

- \* The failure of the referendum on aspects of the Ochrid Accords marked a key point in the history of the state.
- \* The recognition of Macedonia under its chosen name by the United States is likely to open a new phase in the Macedonian Question.
- \* A containable political instability is likely to continue in the immediate future, following the resignation of the Prime Minister after the referendum.

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## **Introduction**

In the period since the end of the armed conflict in Macedonia in 2001 and the signature of the Ochrid Accords peace agreement in August of that year, the political and security agenda has been dominated by the need to implement the Accords to ensure the survival and development of the state. Although the views of internal and external analysts and observers have naturally differed about the degree of success of implementation, it would be fair to say that there has been a general commitment to the Accords as an example of an international peace process of a typical modern type. When the first call was made by a number of Opposition Slav-Macedonian politicians for a referendum on the decentralisation proposals in the Accords that were passing through the Skopje Parliament in summer 2004, there was not a great deal of concern about it in the International Community (IC).<sup>1</sup> The Skopje government was seen as a secure and reasonably successful IC brokered administration, despite the recurrent difficulties of getting the coalition partners to work together and the slow progress in implementing some aspects of Ochrid. It was assumed, correctly, that only a minority of Slav-Macedonians would support rejection of decentralisation, and that the probable low number of voters taking part from the 25% ethnic Albanian minority would mean that the turnout would fail to reach the level required to block the bill going through the assembly in Skopje.

Now, however, it is clear that the referendum (failure as it was for its Opposition sponsors) was a catalyst that has led to one event that may well be as momentous in the history of the Macedonian Question as any since the original FYRoM state referendum of September 1991, namely the American recognition of the state by its preferred name of 'Republic of Macedonia'. The longstanding gridlock in the negotiations since the 1995 'small package' agreement forced on Greece and FYRoM by the Holbrooke negotiation post the Dayton Accords has been dramatically and for most observers, surprisingly, broken.<sup>2</sup> The European Union has not recognised the Republic under its new name, and thus the process of US diplomacy represents another example of the unilateralist policies of the Bush administration.

## **The Referendum Vote**

The vote held on 7 November resulted in a turnout of about 26% of the electorate, and so failed to meet the constitutional requirement that 50% must vote for a referendum to be valid. The Oppositionists and their main backers, the diaspora-controlled World Macedonian Congress, claimed that decentralisation would, by reducing the number of administrative districts in the country, change the ethnic composition of some areas in government in favour of the ethnic Albanian minority. The government coalition and the IC claimed that this was not the case, and that in

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essence the reform only put most boundaries back to where they had been in 1994, in the Kiro Gligorov government era. The failure of the referendum has generally been seen in IC circles as a resounding triumph for 'moderation' and against 'nationalism',<sup>3</sup> and in Greece and elsewhere in the EU the US recognition move was seen as an unnecessary overreaction to the threat of a referendum defeat for the governing coalition. In fact, the American decision rested on a probably more realistic analysis of the new internal crisis.

The American announcement shortly before the vote produced uproar in Greece, and was rightly seen by the Athens press and media as a massive defeat for international Greek diplomacy, and in particular for the Greek lobby in the United States which in the post-9-11 climate had tried to project Greece in Washington as a friendly 'Christian' power in Southeast Europe and a bulwark against terrorism. These positions were reinforced in the popular mind by the non-effects of terrorism on the Olympic Games in August 2004. But hubris is a Greek word, and the regional and geopolitical realities of United States policy do not seem to have been widely understood in Greece. The Olympic period produced a charged and irrational atmosphere in official Greece, in Athens particularly, and even ostensible successes of the pre-Olympic period such as the arrests of the 17 November terrorist group may not be as conclusive as they were presented in the pre-Olympic Games period.

## **The Political Background**

The reality of the situation was that the United States was acting on a more pessimistic appraisal of the internal situation in the FYRoM entity than the Europeans. This rested on some of the following factors:

### **The Economy**

The relative progress in implementing the Accords has not brought much economic progress. According to a representative survey<sup>4</sup> about 80% of the population are considered to live in poverty and national income levels are now among some of the lowest in eastern Europe. About 70% of families of all ethnic groups are only able to afford what is basic to their survival, and over 50% would leave the country if they were able to do so. Real unemployment is probably around 40% of the workforce, although expert opinions differ on this point, as do definitions of employment in non-farm payrolls. In the background is the crisis resulting from the unsatisfactory nature of much privatisation, with most of the worthwhile assets, e.g. in the drinks industry being taken over by foreign, mostly Greek investors, in alliance with local ex-communist managements. The banking sector is drastically short of capital and there have been widespread local allegations of money laundering and financial malpractice by managements to try to fill the capital base gap. The 'Europeanisation' of the economy has led to ruthless competition from imported goods that has driven many small producers out of business, particularly in spheres like meat production. Cheap imports, mostly but not exclusively from Greece, have significantly destabilised the traditional economy and led to rapidly rising unemployment. Government income has not recently benefited from privatisation proceeds as most worthwhile assets have now been sold. Émigré remittances from the large diaspora communities are now central to the survival of the economy and society.

## **Society**

Although the Ochrid Accords have on the whole been successfully forced through the legislative process, there have been many practical problems with administrative implementation. In fields such as health and education, resource constraints have led to the continuation of major imbalances between the facilities available for different Macedonian communities. There has been little sense of growing contact between the two main communities, and in many localities a de facto apartheid situation exists in terms of community separation. As in Kosova, the IC has had an unrealistically short perspective on the length of time needed for the wounds and inter-ethnic division caused by the 2001 conflict to heal. Although considerable effort has been made by the IC, particularly through NGOs to improve community interaction in places like Tetovo, there is no doubt that many small communities of Slav-Macedonians in the majority-Albanian areas in the west like Struga feel threatened, as their reaction to decentralisation indicates. On key Ochrid issues such as the use of the Albanian language in official discourse, most communities outside Skopje are still monolingual.

An analysis of the referendum voting figures is indicative in this respect, and does not produce as healthy a picture as may first appear. Of the approximately 1.6 million people on the electoral roll, a substantial minority are people who do not ordinarily reside in Macedonia. When the last census was made, as in previous censuses, a large number of people normally resident abroad but with full citizenship and passports returned to Macedonia to boost the numbers registering for their ethnic group. Although this has been denied by the government and some IC officials, this did occur, although for obvious reasons exact data and numbers are hard to obtain. In this referendum there was little sign of the diaspora returning to vote, thus the quarter-plus of the electorate who did bother to vote represents a much higher proportion of the people normally resident in the country and part of local Macedonian society than the figures might seem to indicate. Very few Albanians bothered to vote at all. In the poll, in some western Macedonian districts such as Debar and Tetovo which are overwhelmingly Albanian dominated, voter turnout was as minuscule as 0.8% and 5% respectively. Even in a contentious district such as Struga, which had seen violent clashes in the town in August 2004, only about the national average of 29% of voters made a ballot.

As a Radio Free Europe commentator with long experience in Macedonia pointed out, 'the outcome of the referendum is hardly a victory for the governing coalition'.<sup>5</sup> The interpretation of the poll current in the IC is thus arguably superficial - it could equally be argued that the minority community of Albanians that the Ochrid proposals are meant to benefit are not yet engaged in a normal way in the electoral processes of the state, and that there is an entrenched and obstinate constituency within the Slav-Macedonian community, perhaps between a third and a half of them, who do not really accept Ochrid at all and have no real intention of putting it into practice. It is to these people that the US decision to recognise the name Macedonia was directed. In late summer 2004 they had begun to move into a rejectionist position in the referendum campaign. They are concentrated in traditional centres of VMRO support like Prilep and parts of Ochrid, and probably make a majority in parts of the rural east and centre of the country. They have some peripheral influence in the Bush administration as a result of the political and ideological orientation of emigrants in the US Macedonian diaspora, compared to the people who went to British Commonwealth countries like Canada and Australia.

In the later stages of the electoral campaign, opinion polls were moving strongly against the government, and this appears also to have been a major factor in the

US policy decision. A poll taken for the government but conducted fully independently by the Institute for Political, Social and Legal Studies between 18 and 25 September 2004 showed that 53% of those questioned planned to vote, of which 43.5% planned to vote against the decentralisation law. Another poll taken two weeks later by BRIMA-Gallup showed a solid majority of voters planning to vote against the new law. Further questions indicated that not only Opposition VMRO-DPMNE voters opposed the plans but also a large proportion of pro-government party voters opposed decentralisation.<sup>6</sup> The great short term achievement of the American recognition decision is that it cut the ground from under the feet of the rejectionists in the Slavophone community, and reinforced the minority who are prepared to accept, if not like, the Ochrid Accords. There will, however, be a cost, in the sense of a fissure between Greece and its neighbours, and also within Greece, in time, in terms of reactions to ethnic minority claims. The US decision has revitalised the Macedonian issue within Greece in a way that is likely to lead to much more authoritarian government.

## **The Reaction of Neighbouring States & Regional Power Politics**

Regional neighbours reacted in different ways to the decision. Intense pressure has been put by Greece on its neighbours to persuade them not to openly endorse the US position. Greece has been supported by Russia in this. In Bulgaria, where Greece has considerable influence economically and to some extent culturally, there has been no open support for the US as Bulgaria already recognises the 'republic of Macedonia' in the formal sense; in fact, with Turkey, was the first country to do so internationally.

Bulgaria has not officially commented but the fact that it has not done so does not mean that the decision will have no impact in Bulgaria. There are difficult policy choices between the pro-Orthodox, pro-Greek, pro-Russian wing of the political spectrum, and those who see a future for the country exclusively in the EU and NATO. Bulgaria does not have a resolved position towards the future of Macedonia, other than to see the recognition as a stabilising decision. There has been some improvement recently in the human rights position of the Macedonian minority in the Pirin region of Bulgaria.<sup>7</sup>

In Albania the President, Alfred Moisiu, promised to recognise the country under its 'constitutional name', but the powerful Greek lobby in the governing Socialist party has resisted putting this into practice.<sup>8</sup> In practice Greece has the whip hand in many of these discussions as it is an EU member and in some respects is in a position to influence the speed of the EU accession process.

In Albania, and in Kosova, the decision by the US was warmly welcomed, as it clears the way for recognition of Kosovan independence at an appropriate time. Inversely, this was recognised by the Greek Foreign Minister on 10 November, stating that 'the decision opens the way for other changes in the region'.<sup>9</sup> The topic was not, however, mentioned at all in the official communiqué of the Passy/Molyviatis Greek-Bulgarian bilateral foreign ministers meeting twelve days later. The United States has said that it intends now to promote discussions between Athens and Skopje to finally resolve the name issue. In practice this would mean a collapse of the traditional Greek position. It seems highly unlikely that this will be acceptable to Greek public opinion, particularly in northern Greece where 'Macedonianism' in its modern form was born, and where the Greek Orthodox

church is still highly influential.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, the pressures of increasing ethnic diversity in Greece and associated minority rights campaigns are likely to continue to influence political discourse. Russian diplomacy saw the decision in a negative light, and one of the first post-recognition meetings held by President Cervenkovski was with the Russian Ambassador and other functionaries, and the Skopje press afterwards commented on the need to rebuild Russian-Macedonian relationships. The danger from the Skopje point of view of the US decision vis à vis Russia is that it will lead in the medium/long term to an increase in the already considerable Russian commitment to Greece as a regional partner.

## **Resignation**

The first major political casualty of the new phase of the Macedonian Question has been Skopje Prime Minister Hari Kostov, who handed in his resignation on 15 November. This was exactly the opposite result of the referendum that the IC had hoped for, as the campaign was punctuated by frequent threats that Kostov would resign if the motion was carried. In fact he resigned anyway. His statement claimed that Macedonian life was improving but also that ‘there is no consensus and team work in achieving Macedonia’s strategic goals’. The political vacuum so created is likely to stymie serious political life and Ochrid implementation for some time.<sup>11</sup> He also set out a long list of complaints about the way the government malfunctioned in a tone which is likely to worry the IC in Skopje. It will make it hard for proponents of Macedonian NATO and EU membership to advance the case for Macedonian accession to these institutions in the near future if Kostov’s departing analysis of institutional dysfunction and failure is even partly accepted. On the military reform issue there has been much better progress in recent months, but the actual practical capacity of the new armed forces remains uncertain.

The two main candidates for the succession were Tito Petkovski, representing the traditionalist and in his case somewhat more Belgrade oriented wing of the Social democrats, and Vlado Buckovski, who had both more support in the rank and file of the party, and in the Skopje international community. Buckovski won the contest quite easily. He is generally seen as a politician in the manner of late President Boris Trajkovski, with a commitment to Europe and reform, but he is also widely seen as inexperienced, and, to his critics, with a credulous element in his outlook and personality. The main platform for his progress has been the key area of security reform, as ex-Defence Minister, which has given him good US contacts. He has little or no experience, though, in the equally vital area of economic development and management. His first activities have been focussed on wide-ranging talks with politicians from all ethnic groups, to prioritise action to overcome the economic slide and revitalise the Ochrid Accords process. He has gone over the head of the main ethnic Albanian party leader in the coalition, Ali Ahmeti, and held talks with the leader of the other main Albanian party, Arben Xhaferi.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Kondovo Crisis**

A new if minor crisis developed on the ground in the second week of December with the occupation of the village of Kondovo, near Skopje by about 15 armed and uniformed members of an Albanian paramilitary group. Although the crisis was defused without violence by the joint intervention of Ahmeti and Xhaferi’s deputy leader Menduh Thaci, the fact that it took place at all in a key symbolic village very close to Skopje is an indication of the very fragile security climate in some areas of Macedonia.<sup>13</sup> The next developments are all likely to be conditioned by the political process in Kosova. If the process there continues to proceed satisfactorily from the

Albanian point of view towards a political status decision in 2005, the ethnic Albanian leadership in Macedonia will have every incentive to behave in a constructive way and crack down on paramilitary elements in their own community, for which the Kondovo incidents can be seen as a rehearsal. If the international community does not act on Kosova political status, there is every indication that the situation on the ground in Macedonia will become increasingly hard to control.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Observers such as the International Crisis Group research group have seen the decentralisation process as a way of bringing the minority and majority communities in the country together at local level. While an entirely honourable and principled position, it is arguable that this approach neglects to a degree the fears of fragmentation among some older Slav-Macedonians, given the post-1945 history of extreme centralisation of the new republic within the second Yugoslavia, and the total dominance of Skopje in the nation's administrative life.

<sup>2</sup> For a description of the 'small package' agreement, and analysis, see E Kofos, 'Greek Policy Considerations over FYROM Independence and Recognition', in *The New Macedonian Question*, ed James Pettifer, Palgrave/Macmillan, London and New York, 2001. The traditional argument in favour of the 'small package' put forward by Richard Holbrooke and others in the IC was that it would enable a normalisation of trade and economic relations to take place between Greece and FYROM and this would in time lead to improving political relations and a solution to the intractable name dispute. The problem with this view was that it rested on a highly optimistic analysis of the future benefits of Greek economic activity in FYROM. On the military reform programme, see 'Moving Macedonia towards self-sufficiency: A New Security Approach for NATO and the EU', International Crisis Group, Brussels, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, the story by Nicholas Wood in the *International Herald Tribune*, 8 November 2004. 'In a boost for the country's multiethnic coalition government, a referendum backed by Macedonian nationalists that would have blocked efforts to give the country's ethnic Albanian minority greater autonomy appeared likely to fail late Sunday ...'

<sup>4</sup> MIC Daily News report, 3 November 2004.

<sup>5</sup> RFE/RL Balkan Report, Vol 8, No 40, 12 November 2004, commentary by Ulrich Buechsenschuetz. On US diaspora issues, the key point to bear in mind is that in the USA, the Slavmacedonian Diaspora tended to be dominated by pro-Bulgarian elements in the Macedonian Peoples Organisation, inheritors of the old VMRO 'Supremacist' tradition. This is particularly the case in the mid-West. The diaspora in Australia has a quite different and more pliable orientation, so that a leader like Trajkovski emerging from it could articulate a more self-contained 'Macedonian' identity, derived from the traditions of Protogerovism.

<sup>6</sup> RFE/RL Balkan Report, Vol. 8, No 39, 22 October 2004.

<sup>7</sup> For example, the birthday of IMRO hero Yane Sandanski was celebrated this year without the usual accompanying violence between supporters of the underground OMO-Illinden Pirin Macedonian nationalist organisation, and the Bulgarian police. OMO-Illinden is no longer formally banned in Bulgaria but leads a shadowy political existence nonetheless. The lifting of the ban was undertaken unwillingly in Sofia, largely at the behest of those concerned with bringing Bulgarian minorities policy into line with EU standards before accession. The vast majority of Bulgarians still view Slavmacedonians as Bulgarians who have lost their Bulgarian national consciousness and identity.

<sup>8</sup> MIC News, 19 November 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Ta Nea, Athens, 11 November 2004.

<sup>10</sup> The violence and coercion used against dissenting views on the Macedonian issue within Greece is largely unknown in Europe and the US, as a result of the Athenscentric nature of foreign media coverage of Greece and corruption, moral and intellectual, in the foreign embassies. Thus the violent attacks by hundreds of Greek thugs in May 2004 on the congress of the tiny pro-Slav 'Rainbow' party held in Thessaloniki was not condemned by EU officials, nor the subsequent apologia for extremist violence by the Prefect of



Thessaloniki, Panayotis Psomiades on 27 May, who said that the Congress was unwelcome in the city, as the party was 'known for its anti-national views that directly provoke the national reflexes and sensitivities of Greeks all over the world'.

The Greek hard Right has been much strengthened by the Olympic Games and the war on terrorism, and this is likely to directly affect attitudes on the hypersensitive Macedonian issue. As a result of the investment in high technology security devices in the Olympics period, mostly supervised by the US-based SAIC Corporation, the Greek government has some of the most advanced technology in the world (outside the US and Israel) to monitor popular dissent, tap telephones, survey public spaces, use interactive television to spy on dissenters and so on. There is no basis in post-1982 Greek law for most of this activity. It is, of course, arguable that much of this activity is futile given the democratic traditions in Greek popular life and culture. There has been much debate in the Athens media about whether much of the SAIC technology actually works; see 'Athens News', September 2004, and litigation is underway between the company and the Greek government, according to these reports. But in the current climate there is likely to be considerable state coercion against anyone in Greece who advocates a change of current Macedonian policy, and this in the medium term will considerably exacerbate social tension in parts of northern Greece and very considerably, in the diaspora.

<sup>11</sup> The opening statements of both sides do not encourage optimism. See MIC News, 25 October 2004. It is hard to avoid the impression that the US is using the United Nations as a dustbin for the issue, and really believes that most countries will follow the US recognition lead in time and Greece will be forced to abandon the notion that Macedonia is Greek.

<sup>12</sup> Xhaferi is now perhaps the most important strategic thinker in the Albanian world, and has a major influence on Kosova and some Tirana developments as well as in Macedonia. He was the main background influence on the formation of Veton Surroi's new 'Ore' party in Kosova in summer 2004. In response to the new Buckovski-Xhaferi rapport, Ali Ahmeti made a first ever 'official' visit to Kosova in the week of 6 December, and in the PR and Press coverage, appeared to be trying to closely associate his party with that of Ibrahim Rugova in Kosova. How far this is likely to be a functional relationship is very debatable, given the different political traditions of the parties, Rugova's traditionally problematic relationships with leaders of the Macedonian Albanians, and the revitalisation of Xhaferi's party in western Macedonia. For Xhaferi's role in the Kosova war period, see 'Kosova Express' by James Pettifer, C Hurst & Co, London, Wisconsin University Press, USA, Liria, Prishtina, forthcoming 2005.

<sup>13</sup> The village of Kondovo is only about 3km outside central Skopje, and adjoins the major Albanian settlements beyond Serai on the Skopje-Tetovo road. Macedonian army and police forces prevented the 2001 conflict from reaching this important avenue into Skopje. There is a symbolic as well as a practical military and security significance in this. In local tradition, the large Ottoman mosque at Serai was destroyed by a relative of current Macedonian leader Branko Crvenkovski in the aftermath of World War II, something ethnic Albanians have always claimed was a war crime. The ostentatious rebuilding of the Serai mosque in the late-1990s attracted much adverse comment in the Skopje Slavophone press about Islam and the Albanians. In practice, Kondovo is on the exact boundary between majority Slavophone and majority Albanian settlement west of the Macedonian capital. Most local Slavophone press comment on the incidents focussed on the capacity - or lack of it - of the Macedonian security forces to contain Albanian insurgents. See 'Nova Makadonija', Skopje, 9 December 2004. On the Albanian side, the Kondovo crisis was a PR boost for DPSH party deputy leader Menduh Thaci who had for some time been under a political cloud as a result of corruption allegations, but now appears to be fully rehabilitated, and appeared prominently on television and in the newspapers with Ahmeti. In another sign of rehabilitation, an interesting and well researched semi-official book has just been published in Tetovo which celebrates the achievements of Xhaferi and Menduh Thaci together in the DPSH party, 'Partia Demokratike Shqiptare - Lindja Zhvillimi dhe Vepimtaria' by Zeqirja Rexhepi, Tetovo, 2004.

## **Want to Know More ...?**

See: Institute of War & Peace Reporting, '*The 2001 Conflict in FYROM – Reflections*', Conflict Studies Research Centre, Balkans Series, 04/15, June 2004, <http://www.da.mod.uk/csrc>

James Pettifer, '*Balkan Asylum Seekers – Time for a New Approach?*', Conflict Studies Research Centre, Balkans Series, 04/29, September 2004, <http://www.da.mod.uk/csrc>

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