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Crisis in Kosovo: Reactions in Albania and in Macedonia at the Local Level

Gilles de Rapper

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Crisis in Kosovo: Reactions in Albania and Macedonia at the Local Level

by Gilles de Rapper

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In March/April 1998, Gilles de Rapper spent six weeks in Macedonia and Albania for Ethnobarometer interviewing people in towns and villages to assess popular response to the crisis in Kosovo. He returned to the two countries in September for another round of interviews. This report analyses the differences between the reactions to the crisis in Albania and among ethnic Albanians in Macedonia, and how these reactions have evolved between March, when violence started spreading, and mid-September, after the Serbian forces had launched their all-out offensive against the strongholds of the Kosovo Liberation Army.

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1.0 Introduction*

1.1 *Ethnic Albania or Great Albania?*

The expression “Great Albania” (*Shqipëria e Madhe*) is considered to be contrary to the interests of the Albanians, who do not want to be regarded as expansionists and insist that one speak of “ethnic Albania” (*Shqipëria etnike*), which also refers to the territory but makes the Albanian claims seem more “natural” than political. The purpose of this introduction is to describe the way in which Albanians living outside of Albania - in Macedonia especially - regard the question of “ethnic Albania”, above and beyond political considerations.

Ethnic Albanians in Macedonia often refer to Albania as “the mother country” (*shtet amë*). The metaphor of the mother (Albania) and her children (Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro) perhaps is used to suggest that, in spite of the current situation in Albania, the ties with Albanians living abroad will never be broken “because,” quoting a villager of the Polog, “a mother never abandons her children.” Other metaphors are often used: that of the tree (Albania) and its branches (Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro), that of the body and its limbs, or that of body and mind. The latter one is interesting as it ascribes a major role to Albanians living abroad, who are the mind of the nation: although the body is currently ill, ethnic Albanians in Kosovo and Macedonia direct operations and see to it that the nation is always alert.

Although relations with Albania were quite good at the time of Sali Berisha’s presidency, ethnic Albanians in Macedonia have regarded with suspicion the governments that have followed (the socialist governments led by Fatos Nano and subsequently by Pandeli Majko, as of September 1998). Indeed, they are accused of disregarding the fate of ethnic Albanians living abroad and of selling Albania to its all-time enemies: the government is seen as a puppet moved by Greek interests; Fatos Nano is strongly criticised for holding talks with Slobodan Milosevic and receiving in Tirana the Minister of the Interior of Macedonia, considered responsible for police violence against Albanians in Gostivar in July 1997. On the

* Note: for the sake of clarity, in the text the Albanians of Albania are referred to as “Albanians” while those of Kosovo are referred to as “Kosovars”. This usage follows that of the Albanians of Albania. The Albanians of Kosovo, instead, call themselves “Kosovar” but refer to the Albanians of Albania as “those from Albania” (*ata të Shqipërisë*), so as not to give the monopoly of the designation “Albanians” to the population of Albania.

other hand, the hesitant, at times contradictory positions of the Albanian government as regards the Kosovo question (independence or autonomy) are frowned upon.

What is more, independently of the government in office in Tirana, ethnic Albanians in Macedonia feel they cannot rely upon the help of Albanians to solve their problem. Albania has a poor reputation with ethnic Albanians in Macedonia: the latter deplore the influence of communism, which has destroyed the Albanians; Albanians are considered thieves, parasites, idlers. They do not know how to work, they seek easy money and spend their time drinking at the pub. Communism has left their country a shambles, in a state of economic backwardness which it will take decades to erase. All the ethnic Albanians interviewed in Macedonia have gone back to Albania at least once since the fall of communism and most admit they have lost all their illusions about the mother country. Instead of the cradle of the nation which they were expecting to find and had envisioned in their minds at the time the border was closed, what they found was a miserable and dangerous country: since 1997, many have stopped crossing the border for fear of armed bands, and all have been robbed at least once: *“If they know you carry money,”* says a retailer from the village of Banjshte (between Dibër/Debar and the Albanian border) *“they are capable of killing you for it. I’m not going back any more, I’m scared!”*

In spite of everything, ethnic Albanians in Macedonia are convinced that Albanians are greatly advantaged: they have schools and universities, they have the opportunity to develop the national culture, while ethnic Albanians in Macedonia are deprived of all this. Thanks to communism, women are more emancipated, which is seen as an advantage with a view to modernisation and European integration. Likewise, the (assumed) weak religious sentiment of Albanians, and of Muslims especially, is seen as an advantage.

Nonetheless, for all Albanians, the Albanian national community does exist, despite the international borders separating Albanians: Albanians, Kosovars and the Albanians of Macedonia are one and the same people, they have the same language, the same blood, the same flag, the same customs. Indifference towards Kosovo is therefore impossible.

The reference to language is typical of Albanian nationalism: unlike the other nations of the Balkans, which formed around the Orthodox religion, the Albanians, divided into three religious communities (Muslim, Orthodox and Catholic),

founded their nation on the Albanian language. Throughout the entire political separation between Albania and Yugoslavia, the Albanians of Yugoslavia always adopted the linguistic reforms established in Albania. In 1973, at the time of the political separation between the two countries, the decisions of the conference on spelling held in Tirana were also applied by the Albanians of Yugoslavia. Today, the reference to language is still pertinent since the Albanians are the only ones who speak Albanian. As many among them observe: “*We all speak both Albanian and Macedonian, but no Macedonian speaks Albanian.*” In fact, it is true that few non-Albanians speak Albanian, and the Albanian language is thus closely associated to the Albanian identity.

The reference to the flag has taken on great importance since the July 1997 events in Gostivar, whose mayor was arrested and later sentenced to prison for displaying the Albanian flag on the Town Hall on the occasion of an Albanian festivity. His arrest was made possible by a law hurriedly approved less than 24 hours after the event. The Albanians of Macedonia continue to repeat one of the arguments of the Albanian mayors who defended their use of the Albanian flag in Macedonia: “*It is not the flag of the Albanian state, it is the flag of the entire Albanian nation.*” In all the demonstrations that take place in Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia, and European cities where there are many Albanian immigrants, the Albanian flag serves as the main emblem of the Albanian nation.

The reference to religion is also quite important. Muslims account for 70 percent of the population in Albania and for over 90 percent of the Albanian population in Kosovo and Macedonia. There is a clear identification between Muslims/Albanians on the one side and Orthodox/Slavs on the other. Relations between Kosovars and Serbs and those between the Albanians of Macedonia and Macedonians involve the national sphere and the religious sphere alike. This accentuates the solidarity between Kosovars and the Albanians of Macedonia, as Muslims, in the face of the Orthodox Slavs.

Finally, the reference to common customs is also used to give some substance to the nation, although few people are capable of explaining what exactly these customs are. When asked, most people relate them to the “traditional” dimension of Albanian society (including what has been re-invented): weddings, dances, costumes. Actually, however, when it comes to current customs, there appears to be quite a difference between the Albanians of Albania, those of Macedonia and

Kosovars. Some Albanians of Macedonia recognise that from the point of view of customs, they have much more in common with the Macedonians than with the Albanians of Albania. “*It’s understandable,*” says an Albanian student in literature at the University of Tetovë, “*for fifty years we have lived in the same country as the Macedonians, having no contact with Albania.*” Hence, although the unity of the Albanian nation is always explicitly asserted, the sentiment of national community is nevertheless limited by the different political fates of the Kosovars and the Albanians of Macedonia.

As for the issue of national borders, many Albanians do not appear to be especially eager to change them, provided they are “weakened” by a union of sorts of the countries concerned, following the model of the European Union (actually within the framework of the European Union). Such is, for instance, the proposal of Adem Demaçi (formerly a close associate of Rugova, who recently switched sides to become the political representative of the Kosovo Liberation Army - UCK), as envisaged in his “Balkania” project: it is a matter of transforming current Yugoslavia (Serbia-Montenegro) into a federation with no internal borders or national minorities, which can be extended progressively to Macedonia, Albania and other Balkan countries.¹

1.2 Relations between Ethnic Albanians in Macedonia and the Macedonian State

Unlike Kosovo in Serbia, the region of Macedonia in which Albanians live (north-west) does not have a special name. The Albanians of Macedonia do not have a particular ethnonym; they distinguish themselves from the Albanians of Albania by calling the latter “those from Albania” (*ata të Shqipërisë*). Moreover, there is a very strong feeling of internal differentiation within the Albanian regions of Macedonia, in particular between the Polog region (Tetovë, Gostivar and their villages) and the Dibër/Debar region (Dibër, Struga and their villages). The other regions in which Albanians have established themselves (Kumanovë, Kërçovë/Kicevo, Manastir/Bitola) have few ties with the two mentioned above.

The Albanian language is the main marker of the Albanian nation: an Albanian remains Albanian for as long as he/she speaks the Albanian language; if he/she loses

his/her Albanian due to the exclusive use of the Macedonian language, he/she becomes “assimilated”, as the Albanians say, mentioning as an example the case of the Christian Orthodox Albanian population living in the central part of western Macedonia. Today, most Orthodox Albanians have become Macedonians to gain material advantages, both in Yugoslavia and in Macedonia, and the younger generations speak only Macedonian and call themselves Macedonians, whereas their grandparents’ generation spoke only Albanian.

Thus, the Albanians demand that the government endorse the widest possible use of the Albanian language. They want Albanian to be the country’s second official language, next to Macedonian. They complain that they cannot carry out administrative procedures in their mother tongue: all letters addressed to an administration - even local - have to be written in Macedonian or else they are likely to be rejected. Albanian names have to be transcribed into the Cyrillic alphabet, which is not always possible. At post offices, train stations and police headquarters all forms and signposts are in Macedonian, sometimes also in English and in French, but never in Albanian, not even in the towns where the majority of the population is Albanian.

The law on municipalities (1995) recognises the right to use two languages, Albanian and Macedonian, in the documents of the municipalities in which over 50 percent of the population is other than Macedonian (Article 89). Likewise, in towns where Albanians account for more than 50 percent of the population road signs can be in both languages (Article 90). In reality, however, since very few activities are entrusted to the municipalities (mostly water and power supply, garbage collection, road maintenance) these provisions have little effect. On the other hand, the fact that Macedonians do not learn and do not speak Albanian makes it virtually impossible to enforce the law: at a meeting of the municipal council, if there is just one Macedonian and ten Albanians, the deliberations will be in Macedonian rather than in Albanian. Since Macedonian is the only official national language, and since the Macedonians refuse to speak Albanian in practice they always have the upper hand.

Language claims are also made in the area of education, especially higher education. Presently, Albanian primary school students are taught in Albanian. As of the third year of school, all Albanian students are expected to learn Macedonian. In higher education, only the Faculty of Pedagogy in Skopje offers courses in Albanian (that

is where future Albanian teachers study). Albanian students who sign up at other faculties must follow courses in Macedonian in all subjects. Since they have studied only in Albanian until that time, it is hardly surprising that they have a hard time at university and fare less well than Macedonian students.

This is one of the reasons that led in 1994 to the founding, by the ethnic Albanian community, of the Tetovë university, a decision strongly opposed (but tolerated) by the government. In the academic year 1997-1998, the university had more than 4000 students, most coming from the Albanian regions of Macedonia. At the end of this year (1998), the first generation of graduates is going to enter the labour market, but since the university has not yet been recognised by the state, their future does not look very promising.

Employment is indeed a major issue. As of the 1970s, many Albanians of Macedonia worked outside their country, both in the former Yugoslavia, mainly in Croatia (tourism, restaurants, etc.) and in Western Europe (Switzerland, Germany, Austria, Italy). They did so quite successfully, without having to depend on the employment opportunities offered by the state. Consequently, they were relatively well off, as evidenced by the fact that in Albanian villages modern and comfortable houses are much more numerous than in the Macedonian villages of the same region. Slav Macedonians, on the contrary, did not show the same kind of economic dynamism in the field of private enterprise and were less inclined to emigrate (or, if they did, to Canada and Australia, would not return) and have always relied more on permanent jobs in the civil service and in state enterprises.

The independence of Macedonia in 1991 broke the ties that Albanians entertained with the outside world. Not only are visas for travelling abroad now necessary and hard to get, but the Yugoslav market, to which Macedonia exported its agricultural produce, is now closed off, because of the war in the former Yugoslavia and the ensuing re-mapping of international borders in the Balkans. For the Albanians of Macedonia, the current economic and social crisis is not due so much to the transition from a socialist economy to a market economy (which already existed, and from which the Albanians had already benefited) as to the loss of most of their sources of income and to the fact that their low level of education prevents them from seeking remunerative jobs, let alone an elite status.

This situation has caused discontent and is fuelling resentment, also against those

Albanians who have climbed the social ladder in both state institutions and the private sector by abandoning the Albanian language in order to do business with the Macedonians, thus betraying the nation. The Albanians complain that in the public sector, whether it be administrations (including the police and the army) or state enterprises (mining, industry), jobs with responsibility are assigned exclusively to Macedonians, while Albanians, if and when they do find a job always end up in a subordinate position. Undoubtedly, the value system inherited from their communist experience, according to which a paid job is the only noble form of employment, has some bearing on this attitude, even among the Albanians who own and run their own private and independent businesses as retailers, artisans, farmers or small entrepreneurs.

A recurrent complaint is that all Albanians do pay taxes without receiving anything from the state, while being more exposed than others to fines and corruption, since the administrations are mainly in the hands of the Macedonians. Another complaint is that most taxes collected by the highly centralised Macedonian state are redistributed in such a way as to favour the Macedonian municipalities in the centre and the east of the country to the detriment of the Albanian municipalities in the west. Thus the economic crisis which has been plaguing them since the country became independent is viewed by most Albanians as a consequence of the unequal status of Albanians and Macedonians, that is, of ethnically motivated discrimination.

The discontent of the Albanians, so far, is expressed by the separation of the two communities. Such a separation is both ideological and physical (they try to live in separate neighbourhoods, there are virtually no inter-ethnic marriages). Albanians and Macedonians barely co-exist; in the cities, neighbourhoods - both old and new - each have a dominant nationality (Macedonian, Albanian, Tzigane). Most modern buildings, erected in the 1970s, are occupied by Macedonians, especially the "Macedonians of the Aegean", originating from northern Greece, which they left at the end of the Greek civil war (1949). A special programme of the former Yugoslavia gave them permission to settle in western Macedonia at advantageous conditions (they were guaranteed a job and a new house). The Albanians refer to them as "Greeks", which allows them to say that they are not Macedonians and, therefore, that there are fewer Macedonians than is stated (see the comments on demographic data below). They denounce a colonising policy on the part of the then Yugoslav

government, aimed at modifying the composition of the population in western Macedonia (as well as in Kosovo).

Social life is also characterised by division between the two communities: the Albanians only mingle with Albanians, the Macedonians with Macedonians. Shops, cafés and restaurants generally have either Albanian or Macedonian clients. The Albanians say that at times they go to Macedonian bars or restaurants, but that Macedonians never go to Albanian ones. In actual fact, such cases are rare but they do occur, both on the Albanian and on the Macedonian side. The difference is that the Albanians who go to a Macedonian bar or shop speak Macedonian, whereas the Macedonians who go to an Albanian one do not speak Albanian.

Lastly, marriages between Albanians and Macedonians are extremely rare. The Albanians refuse to give their daughters to Macedonian men, for the “*fear*” or “*risk of assimilation*.” The children born of an inter-ethnic marriage will automatically be Macedonian. In this regard, the case of the villages of the Mavrovo region, inhabited by Christian Albanians who married Macedonians and are now assimilated, is often mentioned. On the other hand, when Albanian men are told that they can marry Macedonian women without thereby being in danger of assimilation, they answer that Macedonian women generally refuse to become part of Albanian families and if they do they refuse to learn Albanian and therefore pass their language on to their children, who thus become “assimilated.” It is clear here that the contrast between Albanians and Macedonians covers up the religious difference and opposition between Muslims and Christians, concealed behind language issues: by way of comparison, in southern Albania, where religious opposition is very strong but the language problem does not exist, marriages between Christians and Muslims are rare, but conceivable.

The absence of inter-marriage reveals the Albanians’ mistrust of the Macedonians: they compare their situation to that of the pre-war Bosnians: “*In Bosnia, marriages between Serbs and Muslims were frequent and for the Muslims it was an honour to have a Serbian son-in-law. But this did not do them much good. It did not stop the Serbs from slaughtering them.*”

On the Albanian side, there is first of all the opposition between the Albanian nation, defined as “*the oldest in the Balkans*” and the Macedonian one, which is said to be “*artificial*”. Ethnic Albanians in Macedonia claim that they are the heirs of the ancient Kingdom of Dardania; in other words, that land has always been their

home. As the Albanians see it, the Macedonian nation was built from scratch by Tito after 1945 and “*in reality, Macedonians do not exist*”. Some of the people who today call themselves Macedonians are Serbs, others are Bulgarians, other still are Greeks, not to speak of the “assimilated” Orthodox Albanians. Basically, there are very few real Macedonians. The Albanians greatly insist on the Slav origins of Macedonians and on the fact that the latter cannot claim to have been in the Balkans longer than the Albanians. The Macedonians’ attempts to recover their past history (Philip and Alexander, the star of Vergina) is ridiculed by the Albanians, who are seriously convinced that they descend from the Illyrians.

On the other hand, Macedonians are rarely designated as such by the ethnic Albanians, who call them “Slav Macedonians” or “Slavs”. This allows Albanians to dissociate the state (the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) from its citizens: Macedonians are not the only legitimate citizens of the state, which makes the Albanians just as ‘Macedonian’ as anyone else. In September 1998, one of the electoral slogans of the Albanian Democratic Party (PDSH) was “*Macedonia will either be also the state of the Albanians, or it just will not be.*” By insisting on the Slav origins of the Macedonians, the Albanians try to present their co-existence problems as a single aspect of a general conflict between the Albanians and the Slavs, Kosovo being its core. In other words, the Albanians try to erase the difference between Serbs and Macedonians and to present their situation as an extension of the one in Kosovo. Once again, the Macedonians are not acknowledged as they present themselves, namely as a particular nation, but are considered either an artificial creation or an integral part of a vaster ensemble, that of the Slavs.

As Slavs, the Macedonians are attributed many characteristics. To begin with, they are Orthodox. All Slavs, according to the Albanians, pursue the same goal, which is to spread the Orthodox faith to the detriment of other religions, in this case especially to the detriment of Islam. This makes it possible to affirm that the Slavs unlike the Albanians, do not have a purely national project. The former will not be satisfied until the entire Balkan region is Christian, the latter only want to exist as a nation on the territory that is theirs by right.

The second characteristic of Slavs, always according to the Albanians, is their incompatibility with democracy: “*Wherever there are Slavs, there can be no democracy.*” Communism, as a non-democratic regime, is thus associated with the Slav world. When Albanians are reminded that Albania itself was a communist

dictatorship, they answer that communism originated in a Slav country (Russia) and was brought into Albania by the Yugoslavs (according to this thesis, which has been very popular in Albania since 1992, up until 1948 Enver Hoxha was a puppet in the hands of the Yugoslav communist party). Within the framework of Macedonia, the Albanians see themselves both as an oppressed nation and as political opponents persecuted under communism.

The latter argument is significant insofar as the government coalition in power in Macedonia is formed in part by reformed communists (the Social Democrats, SDSM). Thus the Albanians have had nothing to gain from the independence of Macedonia and from democracy: in the past they were persecuted by the communists, today they are persecuted by the Macedonians, that is, by the same people. On the other hand, especially according to the supporters of the PDSH (Albanian Democratic Party), the officials of the PPD (the Party for Democratic Prosperity), which is a member of the government coalition, are traitors of the nation as well as collaborators of the communists. Such opposition between communists and anti-communists also exists in Albania, and is based on similar arguments. Here, however, it takes on a national tone which makes reconciliation virtually impossible (the Macedonians in power are accused of being corrupt and of having taken advantage of their position following the transition to appropriate national wealth).

The third characteristic of Slavs, according to the Albanians, is that they are deceitful and corrupt. They are also unpredictable, and, many Albanians point out, it is regrettable that the Europeans should consider the Serbs or the Macedonians as valid interlocutors, without realising that Slavs always have an idea in the back of their minds and that they are very good at cheating in order to get what they want. On the contrary, ethnic Albanians present themselves as just and trustworthy people, who would never do what the Serbs did, for example, in early March 1998, when they attacked the village of Drenicë in Kosovo, and killed women and children with the pretext of fighting terrorism. It is worth noting that, in Albania, the Greeks are often accused of being cheats as are the Orthodox Albanians by the Muslims. Here again, the opposition between Albanians and Slavs conceals the opposition between Muslims and Orthodox Christians.

The Albanians also react to the statutory inferiority they feel by disclaiming the reliability of the two censuses taken since 1991, according to which Albanians

account for 23 percent of the population. They maintain that, due to the boycotting of the first census by the Albanians and to the irregularities committed in the second, this figure underestimates the actual number of Albanians. Their own estimates vary between 35 percent and 50 percent. They also like to point out that if one reasons in terms of nation rather than of state, then one should take into account all the Albanians who live in Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia, Turkey, Switzerland, Germany, France, Denmark, Sweden, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Italy and Greece are not on this list, because the Arbëresh of Italy and the Greek Avranites are not considered Albanians, and current emigration to these countries is considered too recent to constitute actual Albanian communities abroad.

The demographic argument is put forward to claim the status of constitutive people of the state, on an equal footing with the Macedonians. Even if one were to accept the figure of 23 percent, they insist, the discrimination of which the Albanian population in Macedonia is victim remains real and unacceptable, especially in the regions where Albanians represent the majority of the population, and the Albanian question should not be covered up by a controversy about figures. In fact, according to the Albanians, the Macedonians are what remains of the country's population if one deducts the Albanians, Turks, Valaques, Tziganes, "Greeks", Bulgarians and Serbs, which is not much. As for Kosovo, the Albanians say that they have as much right as the people of Montenegro to form a republic, since they are more numerous.

In their quest for political legitimacy, the Albanians resort to historical and toponymical arguments. Hence, Albanians attribute an Albanian etymology to most toponyms of western Macedonia which, as in Albania, are of Slav origin, thus justifying the seniority and autochthonous nature of the Albanians. For instance, the name of the city of Tetovo (Tetovë in Albanian) is explained by the Albanians as *tetë hovë*, "eight assaults", referring to the eight battles that the national hero Skënderbe fought against the Turks on that site. The name of the monastery of Saint John Bigorski (between Mavrovo and Dibër) today is considered by the Albanians as the distortion of the Albanian *mbi guri*, "on rock", since the monastery is built on a cliff. And so on and so forth. Thus, one witnesses a constant appropriation of the territory on historical and etymological grounds in response to the real dispossession which the Albanians feel. Not only do they claim to be "occupied" by the

Macedonians, but many of them, especially in the Polog region (the plain of Tetovë and Gostivar) have never recovered their land, which was nationalised under the communist regime.

Bearing in mind the existence of an “Albanian question” which cuts across several states, the outbreak of war in Kosovo in early March 1998 could not fail to have repercussions in Albania and Macedonia. The pages that follow offer an analysis of these repercussions.

2.0 What Kosovo Represents for the Albanians of Albania

2.1 North Against South

As is common knowledge, there is strong opposition between north and south in Albania. It plays a role in as much as the people of the south equate Kosovo to the north: Kosovars are thus described as violent and intransigent mountain people, in contrast to the civilised southerners. When people are asked about Kosovars, they quickly pass from the category of “Kosovar” to that of “northerners” and thus speak of backwardness, dirtiness and violence.

It should also be said that few Albanians outside of the frontier regions are directly acquainted with Kosovo, and that among the Kosovars who have settled in Albania since the opening of the border there are probably many adventurers seeking profitable business opportunities, hence their bad reputation. The same phenomenon occurred in the south with the first Greek “investors” who entered Albania.

2.2 The Role of the Border

The existence of an international border separating Albanians and Kosovars since 1913, with an interruption during the Italian and German occupations of World War II, divided the two populations, which have been subjected to different political regimes and systems since. The border was especially impermeable to people after the split between Albania and Yugoslavia in 1949.

This has had two consequences on the way in which Albanians consider Kosovars.

Albanians insist that they were confined behind their borders during communism, whereas Kosovars had the opportunity to migrate, both within and outside of Yugoslavia - something seen as an advantage. Thus, one finds the same opposition as exists in the south of Albania between Muslims, hardly touched by pre-war immigration, and Christians, many of whom emigrated to the United States: those left behind develop a feeling of inferiority with respect to those who "have seen the world". The latter are more advanced, richer, favoured.

On the other hand, in everyday life, the sense of community does not cross the border. From the point of view of the Albanians, Kosovars are "the others". For instance, referring to the 6:30 television newscast of Albanian Radio and Television, broadcast by satellite and dedicated to Kosovar current events, some Albanians would say: "*The 6:30 news is more for the Kosovars, the 8 o'clock news is for us.*" The fact that Albanians use two different ethnonyms, *shqiptar* (for themselves) and *kosovar*, is also indicative of the feeble sense of community.

2.3 Politics, Media and Public Opinion

The Albanians' position as regards the situation in Kosovo is therefore limited by their mistrust and prejudice against Kosovars. When it comes to voicing an opinion, people generally borrow from the speeches delivered by politicians and intellectuals (who are often one and the same) in the press and on television. Consequently, they speak of the unity of the Albanian nation and of solidarity with the Kosovar brothers.

Yet there appears to be a significant difference between personal opinions and political and intellectual stances. Politicians' statements do not seem to touch the population in the least and are often considered by the latter simply as political manoeuvres. This difference is the result of three phenomena:

- a. Since 1994, and even more so since 1997, many Albanians have displayed a great *mistrust towards politics* and politicians, whom they consider to be incompetent (one person from Tirana said: "*The Defence Minister is a doctor: what does he know about matters pertaining to defence? And the Minister for the Interior is an archaeologist! Why are Ministers not experts in their field?*"), corrupt and dishonest (they are accused of diverting international aid, of being involved in contraband), and of thinking only

of themselves. Moreover, most of the stances taken by politicians are considered political manoeuvres (allowing, for instance, Sali Berisha to return to the political scene and to parliament on 5 March 1998) that do not involve the country. The weakness of the political class is a manifestation of the weakness of the country: “*There is a great deal of talk [about Kosovo], but nothing can be done,*” says another person in Tirana, “*the country is powerless. The others [the Serbs] are backed by Russia, they are strong. What can we do compared to them?*”

It is also worth highlighting that most people do not trust the press and television, which are accused of lying. Most Albanian daily newspapers are directly controlled by a political party or do not conceal their political preferences, and the only television channel is considered, as in the days of communism, as a propaganda tool wielded by those in power. Moreover, most Albanian daily newspapers tend to “create events” and present false headlines which increase the distance between reality and what is reported about it. One of the most popular newspapers in Albania, featured the following front page headline, “Serbs enter into Albania” (*Serbët futen në Shqipëri*), only to reveal on page 7 that it was actually a reconnaissance mission along the border with Albania.² Due to the gap between the sensational declarations of the press and what actually turns out to be the facts, the interest in current events has declined. As a result, the political class and the media have little influence on Albanian public opinion.

b. Since the crisis of 1997, *living standards* have deteriorated and the people’s main concern is combating poverty. People speak more freely about the instability and violence that still afflict the country, financial problems, drugs and the future of their children than they do about events going on in Kosovo. The domestic problems of the Albanian state are considered much more important and concrete than the external problem of Kosovo.

The current objective conditions of the country (disintegration of the state, economic and social hardship) do not allow the population to mobilise and act in favour of Kosovars.

c. Like other post-communist societies, Albanian society is marked by the *absence of civil society*, that is to say, an intermediary level between individuals and the state. Trade unions do not take a position as regards political matters, the voluntary sector is busier seeking money abroad than organising pressure groups at home (with the exception of the Victims of Political Persecution Association - *Shoqata e të*

përndjekurve politikë, very close to right-wing parties), and intellectuals do not engage themselves outside of factious political action: they do not form a compact opinion group. By comparison, immigrant Albanians in Europe and the United States appear to be much more organised and aware. The demonstrations in support of Kosovars in European cities are organised by local Albanian associations (for example the association "Brotherhood" - *Vëllazërimi* - in Athens.)³

The population thus finds itself isolated from policy-makers, and this makes it fall back on the family and the economy. Albanians strive for personal self-fulfilment and prosperity, first and foremost, and there is no such thing as a "political plan" capable of mobilising the entire population.

One must also bear in mind that Albanians are fully aware of their country's economic, political and military weakness. Under such conditions, they rely in a more or less overt way on the "international community" to settle the Kosovo issue and especially to keep Albania out of the conflict. Despite the alarmist statements of the press in the first week of March, Albanians did not feel endangered for they counted on the protection of international forces. As a consequence, in a certain way, they leave the Kosovo issue to others and do not worry about it. Nonetheless, the violence of the images and the information on the fighting going on in Kosovo have triggered a number of reactions.

3.0 The Reactions of Albania's Population to the Outbreak of Conflict in Kosovo

3.1 *Street Demonstrations*

Demonstrations in support of the Kosovar population have taken place in most Albanian cities. They are always organised by local authorities (chief of a district or municipality) or political parties. The right-wing parties (Democratic Party, Republican Party, Balli Kombëtar, etc.) are more active than the left-wing ones in organising such demonstrations, which take the form of a series of official declarations before the population gathers in the town square. Generally speaking, only one such demonstration was organised in each town in the first week of March; but they have not been repeated or, at any rate, have not taken the form of daily protests, as has been the case in Kosovo. At the same time, the question of the

reimbursement of the money lost last year in the pyramid schemes caused more than a hundred people to assemble every day in front of the headquarters of the Vefa company, where some creditors had gone on a hunger strike. In this case, the protests were not organised by the authorities or political parties but by the people themselves, gathered in association. Thus, in a somewhat caricatured way, the Albanians appear to be more willing to fight for their money than for their “Kosovar brothers”.

It is hard to say just how many people participate in the demonstrations in support of Kosovo, since the press tends to overstate the number of participants. The most important demonstration was organised in Tirana, on Friday, 6 March, following the return of the deputies of the Democratic Party to parliament, and on their request. Despite the presence of President Rexhep Mejdani and the speaker of parliament Skënder Gjinushi, the figure dominating the demonstration was the head of the opposition Sali Berisha, who was the most applauded. All declarations clearly asserted the unity of the Albanian nation in the face of the Serb aggressor. There, Albania was defined as the reunification of Kosovo, Gegëri, Toskëri and Tchamerie, like “*a trunk and its branches: If a branch is touched, the whole trunk is attacked, and the latter responds*”. Kosovo is “*our lands, our houses*.” In the name of the government coalition, Pandeli Majko (PS) stated: “*We have to unite, come together: the time has come. We must defend the nation against Belgrade’s chauvinistic aggression.*”

There was a stark contrast between the vindictive tone of the declarations (in which Milosevic was directly accused and threatened, defined as a “*barbarian*”, and “*the butcher of the Balkans*”) and the feeble participation of the population. The several thousand people present had come driven more by curiosity than by a determination to fight. The appeal for national solidarity is not sufficient to make them forget their mistrust towards the political class.

Nonetheless, the following day the press, of both the right and the left, described the demonstration as a historical event (“*Seldom has Tirana’s central square held so many people*”⁴) and spoke of huge crowds, which was absolutely not the case (50,000 participants according to *Gazeta Shqiptare*, hundreds of thousands, according to *Republika*). Actually, the demonstration was nowhere nearly as important as the last electoral meeting of Sali Berisha, at the time of the June 1996 parliamentary elections. The papers also featured on the front page the slogan “*we want weapons*”

chanted in front of the platform by the group of Berisha supporters (it is the same "claque" that has been accompanying him since the electoral campaigns), stating that these words were taken up by all the demonstrators.⁵ In an attempt to erase the impression that the Albanian population was not reacting as it should to the events in Kosovo, a journalist of *Zëri Popullit* wrote that "*the arrival of so many people proves that the issue involving Kosovo and the other Albanian territories unjustly left outside of our state borders is absolutely not as some irresponsible journalists have described it, as if ordinary people in Albania were not concerned with the fate of our brothers from the ex Yugoslavia. In fact, it has been shown once again that our national problem, and Kosovo alone being at the core of this problem, causes deep suffering to the people. [This demonstration] shows that, independently of the great difficulties that oppress the population of the capital, when blood brothers are involved, it is able to take a fair stance and come to their rescue (...).*" Two days before, in fact, the newspaper *Koha Jonë*⁶ had published an editorial entitled "*If we have to fight in Kosovo ... The majority says no, some hesitate, very few are ready for war.*" According to the article, no Albanian has the time to go to war when he is busy crossing the Greek border, sailing across the Adriatic, complaining about the rising prices on the markets, watching where he puts his feet as he walks along the uneven, muddy streets of the capital or getting organised for the next power cut.

The alarmist declarations of the press about the Serbs entering Albania, on Sunday, 8 March, did not change the attitude of Tirana's population. There were just as many people strolling by the lake or eating a meal in the restaurants that line its shore, and their interest for newspaper stands had not grown. Life continued in spite of the commotion reported by the newspapers (alerting of the army, dispatching of foodstuffs to the northern border, visit to Kukës by the Defence Minister, Minister of the Interior and Vice President of Parliament).

This does not mean that, in particular on the northern border, people are not concerned for their relatives in Kosovo or that they do not fear for their safety and their property, but this fear adds to their other personal problems (in particular lack of money, unemployment and poor living standards) without taking the shape of a national fear; people are afraid for themselves and their family, not for the country. Likewise, on 28 March, in the town of Peshkopi, near the borders with Kosovo and Macedonia, conversations revolved mostly around poverty, immigration to Greece or Italy, the absence of the state in this border region, where the roads are in poor

shape, the allocation of land, following its privatisation, does not satisfy everyone, the region's agricultural produce sells badly and there are many thefts. As to the events in Kosovo, people simply express their solidarity with the Kosovars and say how tragic what is going on there is; but what should be done? *"I'm not involved in politics"*, says a local historian, *"I just want my ethnic group to receive the territory it is entitled to"*. A southern Albanian would (typically) say: *"Kosovars fight for a flag, that's all. As for the rest, they are fine, they have plenty of food. They have had the right to migrate, they have roads, houses. Here, we have to struggle every day to find some money, something with which to buy food. I can never have peace of mind, especially when I think about my children's future in this country."* It seems as though the decisions to be taken concerning Kosovo involve only the political sphere or the state, while the reactions of the people as a nation serve as a reminder of the national issue: Kosovo is Albanian, but it is up to the government and the international community to take action.

3.2 The Identity Crisis and the "National Issue"

For the first time, however, the "national issue" (*çështje kombëtare*) is openly debated in the media and political institutions, which are attempting to kindle an Albanian patriotic feeling at a time when the country is experiencing a deep identity crisis. The dreams of power that accompany all forms of national assertion can in fact seduce a population that is coming out of a period of state and national disintegration (in 1997, not only the emblems of the state - the army, the police, the administration - were destroyed, but also those of the nation - libraries, museums, archaeological sites). Under such circumstances, it might be reassuring to look outside of Albania: as Enver Hoxha stated in the 1980s, *"We are not a state of three million people, but a nation of seven million."*

This "explosion of nationalism"⁷ among the Albanians is nevertheless limited; it is more a dream of power than of real political engagement. On 5 March, a performance of the singer Kastriot Tusha was staged at the Tirana Ballet Opera Theatre. The concert featured *"popular songs from the Albanian territories (travë), including those of the diaspora which, on the whole, bearing in mind the current situation in Kosovo, celebrate national unity and peace for all Albanians, wherever they*

may be".⁸ That evening, there was a full house and the performance was entirely devoted to celebrating the Albanian nation: the songs were accompanied by "traditional" dances from various Albanian regions, and, what is more, the repertoire featured only songs about Kosovo and Macedonia, "*without forgetting Tchamerie*", as one of them goes. Every time the name of an Albanian territory outside of Albania was mentioned, the audience clapped and whistled, and the same occurred when the song about the University of Tetovë was sung. The last piece, which featured a dramatic and elaborate scene, ended with a thundering applause. Its refrain went: "*Without union, there is no strength / without Kosovo, there is no Albania / without Albania, there is no Kosovo*" (pa bashkim nuk ka fuqi / pa Kosovë nuk ka Shqipëri / pa Shqipëri Kosovë nuk ka). At the end of the concert, in response to a comment on the political nature of the performance, an Albanian student replied: "*It's not politics, it's patriotism.*" The following day, however, at the "political" demonstration that took place on the same square in Tirana, the public was visibly less enthusiastic as it listened to political leaders assert the determination of the Albanian nation in the face of Serb aggression. Apparently, Albanians were ready to dream of national unity for an hour or two, without personally being ready to take part in achieving this objective.

As of the first week of April, instead of three or four pages, the events in Kosovo take up no more than half a page in the newspapers, and the 8 o'clock news is dedicated entirely to Albania's domestic problems. There is a stark contrast between the interest shown by Albanian politicians and the media at the start of the crisis and the complete absence of significant information on Kosovo some weeks later.

3.3 The Impact of the Conflict on Albania's Domestic Politics

After many months of conflict, the demonstrations in support of Kosovars have vanished and Kosovo has become a major issue in the political debate between the socialist government and the opposition led by former President Sali Berisha. For the opposition, the war in Kosovo is just another way to attack the government. Next to the accusations of corruption and illegal trafficking, the policies of the socialist government are judged to be inconsistent and unfavourable to the cause of the Albanian nation.

The government, for its part, accused the opposition of irresponsibility and hypocrisy, exploiting the misfortune of the Kosovars for the sole aim of returning to power in Albania and trying to obtain the support of the Kosovars in its endeavour to destabilise the state. To this, the opposition responds that the Albanian state is the state of all Albanians and that the Kosovars should not be condemned for taking it to heart: after all, did not many of them give their lives for its creation in 1913? “*For this state,*” Rexhep Kastrati writes,⁹ “*all ethnic Albanians, no matter where and regardless of their political convictions, social class and religion, have given their lives and will do so again today if necessary, that is to say if an infinitesimal part of the current state is threatened.*”

Although the official press still reports a certain number of incidents involving the Yugoslav army along the border, it no longer speaks of the mobilisation of the Albanian army on the border.

3.4 The Refugee Issue

The influx of refugees, which was still negligible in April, now represents a problem. Kosovar refugees arrive in Albania from the north and settle in the regions of Tropojë and Has, which are too poor to assist them and where, due to the absence of state authorities, they are at the mercy of criminals. Therefore, most go to Tirana and Durrës, from where they attempt the crossing to Italy. Due to the situation in Albania, the government is incapable of providing assistance to the refugees; at the same time, the international humanitarian organisations also complain that the insecurity and lawlessness that prevail in the north of Albania make it impossible for them to deliver aid to Kosovar refugees.

The consequences of the presence of these refugees in Albania are widely discussed in the press. The refugees are sometimes seen as a threat to the local population (this is the general attitude towards refugees as a whole, rather than the result of actual actions by Kosovars, who do not come to Albania to steal or kill, but rather are victims of the insecurity that reigns there), and also, at other times, as elements manipulated by the head of the opposition, Sali Berisha. In fact, the opposition has not failed to declare its support for the refugees and to stigmatise the wariness of the government towards the Kosovars. The media which support the government in power have reported that some Kosovars took part in the attempted coup d'état of

14 September at Sali Berisha's side. Here again, the Kosovo question is used in Albania's domestic affairs.

For these reasons, the distance that many Albanians have maintained with respect to the fate of the Kosovars does not seem to have diminished. For a large part of the ethnic Albanian population, in particular in the south of the country, Kosovo is too far away and they just don't want to hear about Kosovars. "*Kosovo, we don't talk about it,*" says a citizen of Bilisht (south-east). "*The Kosovars who came to Tirana brought only trouble. They are bastards. They have got nothing to do with the south.*" The southern regions are not touched by the transit of Kosovar refugees and they have no direct experience of the situation in Kosovo. The same applies to northern Greece which, faced with clandestine Albanian immigration, has not perceived any change since the war began in Kosovo. At the city hall of Dipotamia, a Greek border town, they say that the political crisis which broke out in Tirana on 14 September had much more of an impact on border crossings than the war in Kosovo.

Generally speaking, the current situation has no influence on the way in which ethnic Albanians in the south perceive the Kosovars, and the issue of the future status of Kosovo is of little interest. The reunification of the province to Albania would increase the weight of the north and this, according to Albanians in the south, would not be good for the country. In the town of Pogradec, near lake Ohrid, tradesmen and industrialists who follow national politics are more interested in crafting good relations with neighbouring Greece and Macedonia than they are in the settlement of the Kosovo question. Here, again, the dominating feeling towards the Kosovars is that of mistrust or plain indifference. Both in Bilisht and in Pogradec there are walls covered with "UÇK" graffiti; when questioned, people answer that "*some individuals from Tirana came to write on the walls. It wasn't the local people who did this.*"

4.0 What Kosovo Represents for the Albanians of Macedonia.

4.1 *A Shared Identity...*

Unlike the Albanians of Albania, the Albanians of Macedonia have long lived in contact with Kosovars in the former Yugoslavia, until the border between the Republic of Macedonia and the Yugoslav Federation separated them. The opening of Tetovë University in December 1994 can be seen in this regard as a response to

the breaking off of relations between Macedonia and Kosovo, for up to 1991 most Albanian graduates of Macedonia studied at Prishtinë University.

The closeness of the two populations is also revealed by the number of marriages: many students at Prishtinë University found a spouse during their studies in Kosovo and ended up staying there. Regarding the co-existence of Kosovars and the Albanians of Macedonia, a teacher from Gostivar, close to the PDSH, goes so far as to say: “*The current borders of Kosovo, those of 1974, are not sufficient: they leave out Montenegro and Macedonia,*” as if the place of the Albanians of Macedonia were with the Kosovars.

The Albanians of Macedonia often express an identity peculiar to the region that they occupy and identify more with Kosovo and Prishtinë, the “Albanian capital”, than with Albania and Tirana. So much so that when it comes to the reunification of all Albanians, they have to be reminded of the primacy of Tirana. Thus, when the Association of Albanian Publishers was created in Tirana, on 27 and 28 February, 1998, a journalist working for an Albanian daily newspaper of Macedonia (close to the PPD) wrote: “*The creation of such an association gladdens us all the more because it occurs in the mother state, where, to say the truth, similar undertakings are rare. (...) Finally, the focus of the efforts and commitments for the spiritual union of the Albanians must absolutely be Tirana.*”¹⁰

Since the independence of Macedonia in 1991, the Albanians of Macedonia tend to establish a parallel between their situation and that of the Kosovars. The objective of both the Serbs and the Macedonians, they feel, is to get rid of the Albanians. They recall how, at the time of the police repression against the Albanians of Gostivar, in July 1997 (see 1.1), some had called for collaboration between the two governments, the Serb and the Macedonian. Tetovë University functions like the Albanian university of Prishtinë (many professors teach at both universities), and some Albanian politicians of Macedonia do not rule out the possibility of resorting to parallel and underground social and educational structures, according to the model of the Kosovo Republic, if their demands fail.¹¹

4.2 ...But not Necessarily Political Identification

Due to the fact that they tend to compare their situation in the Macedonian state with that of the Kosovars in the Serb state, the Albanians of Macedonia have a great

deal more to say about the events in Kosovo than do the Albanians of Albania. However not all ethnic Albanians believe that everything that happens in Kosovo foreshadows what could happen in the near future in Macedonia.

The “radical” camp (which does not present itself as radical but as “national”) is the PDSH. In its view, the Macedonian state has a future only if the Albanian question is settled in the sense of acknowledging complete equality (in the status of constitutive population, language, teaching, public function) between Albanians and Macedonians. According to this perspective, the situation in Kosovo can be transposed to Macedonia for the problem is the same in both cases: the Albanians are threatened by the greed for power of a Slav population. Consequently, the events in Kosovo directly concern the Albanians of Macedonia.

On the other hand, according to the “moderate” camp, constituted by the PPD (called “governmental” or “traitor” by the radical camp), the Albanian issue in Macedonia can be settled within the framework of the Macedonian state, independently of the situation in Kosovo. The latter must not be used to poison relations between Albanians and Macedonians nor to exert pressure on the Macedonian government. In this sense, the reaction of the Albanians must be limited to national solidarity: the Albanians of Macedonia must support the Kosovars in the name of the “envisaged community”, that is, the Albanian nation and not in the name of political identification.

Finally, according to the “apolitical” camp, the Albanian issue in Macedonia is artificial, it was created by politicians in their search for power, and it conceals the actual problem of Macedonia, which is one of economic and social transition. Here, the reactions to the events in Kosovo are conditioned by the fear of political manipulation and by the belief that Slavs and Albanians have lived together in the past and will continue to do so in the future.

Last but not least, there is a part of the population, especially young people who have spent some time abroad, that does not consider the “Albanian question” the main problem of the Albanians of Macedonia.

Because of all these divisions and divergent views, the Albanians of Macedonia are not in a position to fully exploit the events in Kosovo, and the political dilemma that they are confronted with is one for which no simple or easy solution can be found.

5.0 The Reactions to the Conflict in Kosovo

5.1 *The War in Kosovo: a "Definitive Solution" of the Albanian Question?*

For all of these reasons, the Albanians of Macedonia, much more than the Albanians of Albania, feel very much concerned about the situation in Kosovo. Far more so than in Albania, people follow with interest the progress of events in Kosovo, on television and in the press, but also by speaking with Kosovars coming to Macedonia (we are not talking about refugees here, but of Kosovars who come to Macedonia on business or to visit their family). One of the newspapers that is most widely read in the Albanian towns of Macedonia is the daily *Koha Ditore*, of Prishtinë, which is, instead, hard to find in Albania. In early March, a shopkeeper from Tetovë commented on the dismal aspect of the town: "*Usually people go for a stroll in the evening, but now they all stay indoors to watch the news; no one comes into town anymore.*" Perhaps the cold weather was equally to blame for this, but it is true that many people, especially among the most politicised, plan their day around the hours of the newscasts.

At the beginning, when the conflict erupted, the predominant feeling seemed to be that the crisis in Kosovo would be the last crisis, which would lead to a definitive solution of the Albanian question. The expression "definitive solution" here acknowledges the historical injustice that in 1913 and 1920 left half of the Albanian population outside of Albania and divided Slavs and Albanians into separate states.

Therefore, non surprisingly, the conflict in Kosovo has had direct repercussions (contrary to the reassuring statements made by President Gligorov in an interview to *Le Monde*, on 28 March) on the way in which ethnic Albanians deal with some Macedonian matters. This is the case, for instance, of the incarceration of Rufe Osmani, the PDSH mayor of Gostivar, on 13 April, followed by his sentencing for the flag question. On 15 April, a Central Council for the organisation of Albanian demonstrations in Macedonia (PDSH) illustrated the nature of its action during a press conference in Gostivar: a demonstration would take place downtown every day from 12.30 to 1 o'clock to obtain the release of the mayor, that is to say at the same time and in the same way as the "protest promenades" that had been taking place for several days in the towns of Kosovo. The slogans chanted on the occasion of the

first demonstration in support of Rufi Osmani were inspired by the ones adopted for Kosovo: “*Jetën e japim. Rufiun s’e japim*” (we give up our lives, we do not give up Rufi), from “*Jetën e japim. Kosovën s’e japim.*”

The crisis in Kosovo has also brought the two leading Albanian parties somewhat closer. On 28 March, the president of PPD, Abdurrahman Haliti, said to the press: “*Occasionally, we present common stances, as was the case with the letter sent to the North Atlantic structures in which we illustrated our position on the question of Kosovo, or when we organised together a major demonstration in Skopje, which had an extremely important impact on public opinion worldwide*”¹². However, the decision by the PDSH to withdraw all its elected members from all public institutions (parliament as well as city councils) following the incarceration of Rufi Osmani¹³ was denounced by the PPD as an electoral move. The PPD felt that “*acting on the basis of an analogy with the situation in Kosovo [that is to say withdrawing the Albanians from official institutions] does not favour a quick settlement of the Kosovo question, and we all know that today the Albanians should focus their political energy on settling that problem, which is so important for all Albanians*”.¹⁴ In spite of these disagreements, the two parties signed an electoral pact for the October/November 1998 parliamentary elections (see 3.3).

From the very beginning many ethnic Albanians felt a war was inevitable. As Rufi Osmani said during an interview: “*No doubt there will be a war, for in the Balkans compromises are reached after fighting, never before.*” According to the head of an Albanian enterprise in Tetovë, who lived for a long time in Switzerland, “*the separation of the Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo is inevitable. It would be better if it were achieved by peaceful means rather than with a war, but it is inevitable. As Albanians of Macedonia, we suffer for what is happening in Kosovo, but we are different from those of Kosovo, we are not as determined. It is not possible to say whether we are going to fight in Kosovo or not. If war breaks out, yes, without a doubt.*” Others, especially the young militants or sympathisers of the PDSH, would declare that they were ready to fight, for a defeat of the Albanians in Kosovo would also be a defeat of the Albanians of Macedonia, and further weaken the balance of power between them and the Macedonians.

In this sense, much more so than the Albanians of Albania, the Albanians of Macedonia are in favour of the total independence of Kosovo. They feel they could rely on an independent Kosovo much more than on today’s Albania to exercise

pressure on the Macedonian state. In fact, while the Albanians of Macedonia generally trusted Sali Berisha to defend their interests (there were close ties between the local sections of the Democratic Party (PD) in Albania and those of the PDSH in Macedonia), they are much more distrustful of the government of Fatos Nano, whom they accuse of selling Albania to foreigners (especially the Greeks) and of conferring with those who oppress the Albanians (quoting as examples the Nano-Milosevic meeting in Crete in November 1997, and the visit to Tirana of the Macedonian Minister of the Interior, held responsible for police repression against the Albanians - see 1.1). The fact that Fatos Nano is a socialist does not help, as the Albanians of Macedonia hold the communists to blame for Albania's current state, including its level of national consciousness. "*During communism,*" says a professor from Tetovë, "*the Albanian state did not defend the Albanian identity (shqiptarizëm). Albanian first names were replaced by 'Roberts' [Western names], the great intellectuals, like Fishta, were eliminated and were not honoured as they deserved to be.*" Significantly, it was at the time of the Albanian crisis in 1997 that the leaders of the PDSH, undoubtedly feeling that they could not expect much of the Albanian government, started talking less of "ethnic Albania", thus implicitly abandoning their separatist claims.

5.2 *Solidarity Versus Reality*

Such a realistic approach to the national issue has been strengthened by six months of armed conflict in Kosovo. The defeats suffered by the Liberation Army and the political divisions that emerged among the Kosovars have dispelled the hopes raised earlier on in spring 1998. Thus the creation of a Great Albania is not explicitly called for at the present time by the majority of people, although it does remain an ideal to be attained in the future, even for the ethnic Albanians who for the moment are prepared to live in a Macedonian state which would grant them full equality with the Macedonians (recognition of the Albanian language as the country's second official language and of the Albanians as a constituent people of Macedonia). Quite apart from other considerations, ethnic Albanians in Macedonia are aware that, compared to the Albanians of Kosovo, Montenegro and Albania, they are relatively well-off and enjoy a certain economic and political stability. This prevents them

from engaging in a political venture in Kosovo, in which they would have much to lose.

Notwithstanding the enthusiasm raised by the “heroic fight” of the Kosovars (seen as the symbol of resistance and courage, the pride of the nation), solidarity with the Kosovars never meant that ethnic Albanians in Macedonia believed that independence would be achieved overnight. Reunification of the Albanian regions of Macedonia with Kosovo is not openly envisaged, no more than reunification with Albania. Nor is a peaceful division of Macedonia (as in Czechoslovakia) regarded as possible, due to the clashing interests of the Serbs, Greeks and Bulgarians. Above all, it would require the reunification of western Macedonia with Albania, which is not desirable, for the Albanians of Macedonia are aware of their economic superiority and greater political maturity, and have a very low opinion (as already noted) of the people of Albania who, they claim, have always been interested only in themselves and in making easy money, and not in the nation.

It is true that the claims of ethnic Albanians in Macedonia are organised according to various “minimal platforms” which range from modification of the constitution and recognition of the Albanians as a constitutive people, on an equal footing with the Macedonians, to greater decentralisation and delegation of more power to municipalities, and a referendum on the self-government of Albanian regions (like the one held in 1992), all the way to the establishment of parallel, autonomous social and educational structures, following the model of Kosovo. Most Albanians who supports such platforms also believe that they should keep quiet until the Kosovo question is solved, so as not to create new enemies: *“For the time being, only the Serbs are declared enemies, we must not let the Macedonians join them.”*

They also say that, whatever the solution may be, they would be prepared to respect the principle of the intangibility of the borders (although they consider it unfair since it was not respected when Yugoslavia collapsed), on the condition that border crossing regulations be relaxed to allow for the free circulation of Albanians in the various countries in which they live.

Contrary to the excitement and hope that characterised the first months of the war, a certain resignation now seems to prevail. Following the defeat of the Liberation Army (UÇK) by the Serbian forces, a solution favourable to the Kosovars seems more and more unlikely, at least in the short term. *“The war is going to be long,”* says a citizen of Tetovë, *“the people will suffer, but we are going to win.”* *“The*

Albanians are capable of fighting for their freedom,” says a PDSH official, *“Kosovo will be independent.”* And yet, the gap between the interest shown by ethnic Albanians in Macedonia towards the crisis in Kosovo and their actual involvement in support of the Kosovars has grown since the beginning of the war, and continues to grow.

The information coming from Kosovo¹⁵ produces two different reactions. On one hand, ethnic Albanians in Macedonia react to the “brutality” of the Serbs as they are especially sensitive to the fact that many of the victims are women, children or elderly people, killed in atrocious circumstances. The press does not hesitate to publish very stark photographs (as in *Koha Ditore* on 29 September, a baby lying on the bleeding body of his mother) and emphasises the tragic nature and injustice of the war.

On the other hand, people object to another form of injustice, namely that of the international community. The latter is condemned for not taking action and letting the Serbs do as they please. Information on NATO’s military preparations and on the statements of the various foreign diplomats are regarded with great mistrust and disillusionment; most people feel that the outcome of the crisis will be determined by fate and that the international community can do nothing about it.

5.3 The Impact of the Conflict on Domestic Politics

The campaign for the 18 October/8 November parliamentary election has evidenced a certain lack of interest in political matters, whether it be the struggle of ethnic Albanians of Macedonia in their country or their involvement in the Kosovo crisis. The electoral agreement signed on 9 September by the two Albanian parties (PPD and PDSH) is regarded with suspicion. Some see it as a device for staying in power rather than as an important step towards improving the condition of ethnic Albanians in Macedonia. *“Those who have negotiated the agreement here,”* a citizen of Tetovë explains, *“are our own worst enemies: why, they cannot come together without jumping at each other’s throats, and now they want us to believe that they have become friends for the good of the people? The only purpose of this agreement is to allow them to hold on to their seats; they know that without an alliance they will not be re-elected.”* The electoral pact alone cannot erase the division that exists

between the Albanian parties, and the absence of tangible results after the last elections has caused some voters to turn their back on the Albanian parties, who now fear that the Albanians will give their votes to the Alternative Democratic Party (AD), led by Vasil Tupurkovski, who aims to overrun the ethnic divisions that characterise most political parties in Macedonia. The electoral meeting that PDSH held in Dibër on 27 September seems to confirm the lack of interest in the campaign. Like all other electoral meetings of PDSH¹⁶, the event was opened with the Albanian national anthem, followed by a minute of silence dedicated to the victims of the war in Kosovo. Yet such references to the nation were not sufficient to arouse the interest of the public. The atmosphere remained quiet throughout the meeting and everyone left at the end of the speeches - no questions were asked and there was no debate.

The ethnic or national dimension of Albanian politics in Macedonia seems to have moved away from the forefront, as Albanians apparently feel that it is irrelevant to their social and economic problems. According to many observers, ethnic Albanians in Macedonia who operate in trade and small enterprises strive to achieve success and guarantee a future for their children or are concerned with more important problems than just national assertion, such as the economic and tourist development of the region in which they have settled, or the environment. *"We have to get these national ideas out of our heads,"* says a family man from Tetovë, *"we must think about work and focus on the economy. The Polog alone is capable of feeding the two million people who live in the country: why fight?"*

In such circumstances, the concept of nation, even when the issue is Kosovo, remains abstract. National unity cannot but be affirmed (unlike the Albanians of Albania, ethnic Albanians in Macedonia do not claim that Kosovo is not their problem), indeed it is often deeply felt (on account of family ties and personal experiences dating back to the days of Yugoslavia), yet today it is neither experienced nor practised, since the direct involvement of Macedonia's ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, or of the Kosovars in Macedonia, is not envisaged.

Nonetheless, reference to the struggle of the Kosovars is always present, and the Liberation Army may represent a model for the extremist fringe of the Albanian population. In September, the Macedonian police carried out a series of arrests (in some cases resorting to violence, which caused one death), in the cities of Skopje, Kumanovo and Kërçovë/Kicevo, with the pretext of dismembering Albanian

terrorist groups close to the UÇK. Although there is no evidence that the people arrested were actually involved in terrorist activities, weapons and ammunitions were found in the homes of some Albanians.¹⁷

Questioned on the future political action of ethnic Albanians should the government resulting from the forthcoming elections fail to do something in favour of the Albanian population, a PDSH official said: “*Other measures will have to be taken, at that point. For instance, a new referendum on autonomy, the removal of ethnic Albanians from all institutions, establishing a parallel parliament and government [like Kosovo, that is]. It could go as far as the withdrawal of Albanians from the political scene, and the arrival of new players, like the UÇK.*”¹⁸

Notes

¹ *Rilindja*, 27 March 1998, p. 2.

² *Koha Jonë*, 8 March 1998.

³ *Ibidem*

⁴ *Zëri Popullit*, 7 March 1998.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p.3.

⁶ *Koha Jonë*, 5 March 1998.

⁷ *Ibidem*, 7 March 1998.

⁸ *Republika*, 5 March 1998

⁹ *Fakti*, 30 September 1998, p. 10.

¹⁰ *Flaka*, 12 March 1998.

¹¹ Interview to Rufi Osmani, PDSH Mayor of Gostivar.

¹² *Rilindja*, 29 March 1998.

¹³ *Koha Ditore*, 13 April 1998.

¹⁴ *Rilindja*, 16 April 1998.

¹⁵ The Kosovar paper *Koha Ditore* is still read in the Albanian towns of Macedonia, and the new Albanian daily newspaper *Fakti*, launched in Skopje in April 1998, dedicates at least one page each day to information from Kosovo. These two papers provide details on the operations against Kosovar towns, listing the names and age of the victims. Such information is of interest to whoever has relatives in Kosovo, as is often the case.

¹⁶ *Rilindja*, 27 September 1998, p. 5; *Fakti*, 30 September 1998, p. 3.

¹⁷ *Fakti*, 26 September 1998, p. 4, *Koha Ditore*, 28 September 1998, p. 4. The fact that arms and ammunitions were found was also reported in the Albanian press.

¹⁸ Interview with Iljaz Halimi, Vice President of the PDSH.

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