

Maclean's

The next Bosnia?

Another Balkan country teeters on the brink



RUSSELL LIEBMAN/SIPA

Macedonian troops in Skopje: economic pressures and ethnic tensions

Marie Sassine is worried. Her job, as a representative of the United Nations in the former Yugoslav republic of Macedonia, is to monitor the enforcement of economic sanctions against neighboring Serbia. But every day, the 38-year-old former Halifax resident also sees evidence of the crushing economic damage that the banning of trade with Serbia has unintentionally inflicted on the tiny Balkan nation. The sanctions not only cut Macedonia off from its major trading partner, but also from its direct trucking routes and only rail link to most of the rest of Europe. On top of those difficulties, Macedonia is plagued by internal tensions and strained relations with its neighbors—problems that, if unchecked, could lead to the sort of ethnic violence that now afflicts Bosnia. “The world shouldn’t have illusions about this country’s stability,” warns Sassine. “People are really hurting here.”

The statistics tell a grim story. Before May, 1993, when the United Nations imposed a trade embargo on Serbia and its ally, Montenegro, Macedonia traded some 16-million tons of goods annually; last year, the figure was just 2.4 million. Across the country, factories have closed and farmers have been unable to find foreign buyers for their produce. The unemployment rate is officially 30 per cent, and the number of families on welfare

doubled last year to 50,000. “Our latest calculations show the embargo has cost Macedonia over \$2 billion dollars (US),” said Dimitar Belčev, a senior official at the ministry of foreign relations in Skopje, the capital. Macedonian-Canadians are acutely aware of the problems. Said Teli Moriochev, president of the Toronto-based United Macedonia, one of several organizations representing the estimated 150,000 Canadians of Macedonian descent: “We’ve raised money for Macedonian relief, sent medicine and clothes there and lobbied the Canadian government for help. The people are really suffering.”

Macedonia’s southern neighbor, Greece, is making



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life even more difficult. Athens refuses to recognize Macedonia, saying that the country’s name implies territorial designs on Greece’s northern province of the same name. And Greece has closed its borders to anyone bearing a Macedonian passport or driving a car with Macedonian plates, cutting off much of landlocked Macedonia’s commercial traffic from its traditional port in Thessaloniki. That has forced Macedonian businesses to rely on the dilapidated Albanian port of Durres.

As economic pressures increase, so does the risk of conflict between Macedonia’s Slavic majority and the mainly Muslim Albanian minority. Albanians, who account for at least a fifth of Macedonia’s two million citizens, are well-treated by Balkan standards. There are Albanian-language schools, newspapers and TV shows. The largest Albanian political group, the Party for Democratic Prosperity (PDP), is even part of the governing coalition. But Macedonian-Albanians are far from satisfied. “We want Albanians to be equal with Macedonians,” said Sami Ibrahim, the vice-president of the PDP, which has demanded an end to job discrimination in universities, the government bureaucracy and police forces.

Relations between the two communities appear calm for now, but there are tensions beneath the surface. In 1992, three people died during an Albanian anti-police riot in Skopje. And in November, nine Albanians, including the deputy defence minister, were arrested on charges of smuggling weapons. The government alleges that the suspects advocate unity with neighboring Albania.

There are hardliners on the Slavic side, too. In the last elections in 1990, ultranationalist parties won the biggest share of the vote, although they were kept out of power by the governing coalition. Now Western observers worry that the nationalists will capitalize on discontent with the poor economy. “If someone wants to make us hate Albanians, it’s very easy,” said Darko Stevanoski, a bearded young Slavic engineer. “Most people believe what they read or see on TV. If someone wants to make war here, they can.”

The main worry for Macedonia is the Serbian province of Kosovo, where a huge Albanian majority lives under virtual military dictatorship. Any unrest there would likely spill over into Macedonia, and probably Albania as well. That could give Serbia an excuse to send its troops into Macedonia, which the Serbs have ruled in the past. Bulgaria, which occupied Macedonia as recently as the Second World War, might also be tempted to grab territory. Analysts say that such a conflict could easily draw in Balkan

archivals Turkey and Greece. To prevent that scenario, the United Nations has stationed more than 1,000 troops, on the Macedonian-Serbian border. But if there is a lesson in Bosnia’s 21-month-old war, it is that a UN military presence alone is not enough to ensure peace in the turbulent Balkans.

VINCE BEISER in Skopje