

# MACEDONIA: SURVIVING THE BALKAN WARS OF 1991–2002 AND THEIR AFTERMATH

*Review article*

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**Laurence Armand French, Ph.D.s<sup>1</sup>**

*Western New Mexico University;*

*Justiceworks University of New Hampshire*

**Goran Kovacevic, Ph.D.**

*Faculty of Criminal Sciences and Security Studies*

*University of Sarajevo*

*Bosnia-Herzegovina*

## **Abstract:**

*The Balkan Wars of 1991–2002 were the deadliest conflicts in Europe since the Second World War – one dominated by ethnic cleansing resulting in over 100,000 deaths, many non-combatant civilians, with over a million people displaced from their traditional homes. The major parties in the 1991–1996 war were ethnic Croats (Roman Catholic), Bosniacs (Muslims), and ethnic Serbs (Orthodox Christian) while the 1999–2002 Kosovo War involved Serbs and ethnic Albanians (Muslims). While Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, and Kosovo have dominated the international spotlight regarding the Third Balkan Wars, Macedonia played a significant role in the breakup of the former Yugoslavia especially relevant to the treatment of the Roma, a group that has long been part of the Balkan culture that suffered greatly during the Balkan Wars. Yet, the forces that forged the settlements for these conflicts basically ignored both Macedonia and the Roma: the United States, European Union, and the United Nations. Thus, while Macedonia was spared from much of the conflict during the initial 1991–1996 battles, other than playing an important role in supporting the displaced refugees, it got caught up in the latter part of the Third Balkan Wars when Kosovo separated from Serbia.*

**Keywords:** *Macedonia, Roma, Ethnic minorities, Balkan wars, refugees, peace operations*

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<sup>1</sup> Correspondence to: Laurence Armand French, Ph.D.s, Western New Mexico University; Affiliate Professor, Justiceworks University of New Hampshire; Fulbright Scholar University of Sarajevo (2009-2010). E-mail: frogwnmu@yahoo.com; Goran Kovacevic, Ph.D.s, Faculty of Criminal Sciences and Security Studies University of Sarajevo Bosnia-Herzegovina. E-mail: gkivacevic@fkn.unsa.ba

## MACEDONIA: SURVIVING THE BALKAN WARS OF 1991-2002 AND THEIR AFTERMATH

### The Unraveling of Yugoslavia during the Balkan Wars of 1991–2001

This process began in 1990 at the 14<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party with Slovenia and Croatia delegates leaving in protest initiating events that led to ultra-nationalism among the three largest sectarian groups – Catholic Croats, Orthodox Serbs and Muslim Bosniaks. Lost in this struggle were the Roma and Jews who also share a long history in the region. The “Third Balkan War” began on June 25, 1991. Slovenia, after voting the Communists out of office, began the secession process resulting in their *Ten-Day War*. Their neighbors to the south, Croatia, also declared their independence from Yugoslavia. The standoff between the Yugoslav People’s Army (JNA) and the Slovenian police and territorial defense resulted in several dozen deaths but no major battles. A tentative peace was established on July 9, 1991 and the Yugoslavian President Milosević withdrew the JNA from Slovenia on October 26, 1991. This minor scrimmage fueled the ultra-nationalism that fanned the flames of the ensuing Third Balkan War (Beloff, 1997; Gow & Carmichael, 1999; Ramet, 2006; Ripley, 2001).

The main battle leading to a full-fledged war was associated with Croatia’s bid for independence. Croatian leader, Franjo Tuđman, on December 22, 1990, got the Croatian parliament, to adopt a new constitution that eliminated the protective elements of the 1965 and 1974 Yugoslav Constitution that provided equal treatment for Serbian enclaves residing within Croatia. This action gave superior status to Croatian Catholics while discriminating against the indigenous Serb minority as well as other minorities such as Jews and Roma. This action led the Serbs in the Krajina (Military Frontier) region to demand their own independence within an independent Croatia. The Serbs lived for generations in the Krajina region, brought there by the Austrian-Hungarian Empire in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century to serve as a buffer against the Ottoman Empire. The Serbs in this region constituted about 12 percent of the Croatian population at the time of its declaration of independence in 1991. The ensuing Croatian civil war pitted Tuđman’s ultra-nationalists against the *Serbian Autonomous Oblast of Krajina* (SAO) which now proclaimed themselves the *Republic of Serbian Krajina* (RSK). When this element of the Balkan War ended in 1995, tens-of-thousands of indigenous Croatian Serbs were forced into exile, mainly into Serbia, while those who remained were subjected to torture and murder. Likewise, the RSK attempted to cleanse its territory (a third of Croatia) of Croatian Catholics also resulting in mass displacements of people, the murder of civilians and the destruction of cultural artifacts. This action resulted in the introduction of the *United Nations Protection Force* (UNPROFOR) into the Balkan War and the establishment of *United Nations Protected Areas* (UNPAs).

In 1991, *Macedonia* also declared its independence with little resistance from its parent – the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia – mainly because it was considered to be an ally of the Orthodox Serbs, like its neighbor, Montenegro. The second major battle front in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Balkan War erupted when Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) declared its independence in April 1992. This conflict involved all three sectarian groups with extreme violence initiated by all parties – much of it directed toward civilians. Initially the fighting in-

volved the Bosnian Serbs and the Bosniaks whereby the indigenous Serbs feared a Bosnia ruled by Islamic Slavs and a situation where they would again be labeled as second-class citizens. In 1993, the conflict now included Catholic Bosnian Croats, supported by Croatia, battling the Muslim Bosniaks. Some of the heaviest fighting in this theater was in the Herzegovina section of Bosnia. As early as March 1991, the ultra-nationalists leaders of Serbia (Slobodan Milošević, also the leader of what remained of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) and Croatia (Franjo Tuđman) conspired to partition BiH between their respective countries. This was known as the Karadžorđevo Agreement that essentially promoted both a *Greater Croatia* and a *Greater Serbia* being carved out of the remaining Yugoslavia. The United Nations Security Council, in anticipation of growing conflicts in the region, passed Resolution 713 imposing an arms embargo throughout the former Yugoslavia (Sibler & Little, 1995).

Tuđman's ultra-nationalist party, the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) attempted to do the same thing in Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) that the Croat Serbs attempted in Krajina – taking over a segment of BiH and naming it the *Croatian Republic of Herzeg-Bosnia*. This action occurred on November 18, 1991, when the HDZ branch leaders in Bosnia-Herzegovina declared their independence. In a similar fashion, the Bosnian Serbs, on October 24, 1991, abandoned the tri-ethnic coalition that governed BiH since 1990, creating their own Assembly of the Serb People of Bosnia and Herzegovina. On January 9, 1992, the assembly established the Serbian Republic of Bosnian and Herzegovina that later was changed to the *Republika Srpska* (RS) in August 1992. The stage was now set for the battle of Bosnia-Herzegovina, a conflict that engulfed the entire country until late December 1995 with the signing of the Dayton Accord (Dayton Peace Accord, 1995).

There was the possibility for peace with the Cutileiro-Carrington Plan (Lisbon Agreement) forged by the European Economic Community (EEC) on March 18, 1992. This agreement proposed ethnic power-sharing at all administrative levels but with respective communities defined according to their sectarian majority – Muslim Bosniak, Catholic Bosnian Croat, Orthodox Bosnian Serb. But apparently under pressure from the United States, the leader of the Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks), Alija Izetbegović, withdrew his signature and support for the agreement ten days later setting the stage for the horrific battles that ensued. The U.S. Congress also attempted to override the UN arms embargo with these efforts vetoed by President Bill Clinton. The embargo, although often breached through the porous mountainous borders, left the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) with the bulk of heavy armaments including artillery and tanks. The JNA leader, General Ratko Mladić, sided with the Bosnian Serbs and the Army of Republika Srpska (VRS).

These forces (VRS) was responsible for the 44-month siege of Sarajevo where even the UN Protective Forces had limited results other than keeping the airport open allowing for the basic essentials to sustain the besieged population. Another failure of the UNPROFOR was the protection of Srebrenica where it is estimated that some 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys were massacred from July 12–22, 1995 by the army led by Ratko Mladić. Interestingly, the forces defending Sarajevo during the siege, the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina (ARBiH), not only outnumbered the RS forces surrounding the city, but consisted of members from all sectarian and ethnic groups residing in Sarajevo (Glenny, 1993).

The Croat-Bosniak War from June 19, 1992 until February 23, 1994 engulfed 30 percent of the country into a separate war. The purpose of this war was Croatian domina-

tion of the central and eastern regions of BiH known historically as Herzegovina. Again this conflict involved ethnic cleansing and atrocities against both combatants and civilians. Mostar, long considered the de facto capital of Herzegovina, was held under siege for nine months by Croat forces and the destruction of the city and its religious and cultural structures including the iconic Stari Most Bridge. This time both Bosniaks and Bosnian Serbs became the targets for Croat aggression. It is widely understood that the United States favored both the Catholic Croats and Muslim Bosniaks over the Orthodox Serbs. Toward this end, the US began efforts for these two groups to settle their differences and form a coalition that would unite against the Serbian forces. Both warring parties signed the US-initiated peace agreement (the Washington Agreement) in March 1994 leading to the creation of the joint Bosniak-Croat Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina (FBiH) with the population divided into ten cantons (seven predominately Muslim and three predominately Bosnian Croat).

At the same time the United States was clandestinely using private military security forces, MPRI (Military Professional Resources, Inc.), to arm and train the Croatian Army in its fight against Serbian forces as well as smuggling arms to the ARBiH. These initiatives allowed the Croats to break the stalemate with Serbian forces in the summer of 1995 in two actions, *Operation Flash* and *Operation Storm* driving the Serbs out of most of Croatia. These actions were followed by *Operation Maestral*, a combined Croat/Bosniak effort to push back the Bosnian Serbs in BiH. These operations, along with the ensuing NATO bombing brought the combined Croat and FBiH troops to the outskirts of Banja Luka, the de facto capital of RS. The signing of the Dayton Peace Accord on December 14, 1995 effectively ended the fighting in both Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina resulting in the FBiH comprising of about 51 percent of the country and RS with 49 percent with Sarajevo separated into two segments with East Sarajevo belonging to RS (Ripley, 2001).

Following the Dayton Peace Accords, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) was reduced to just two of the original six republics, now consisting only of Serbia and Montenegro. Moreover, under Tito, both Kosovo and the Vojvodian regions of Serbia were made semi-autonomous provinces. Under the 1974 Yugoslav Constitution both provinces had their own seat on the federal presidency along their own provincial assembly, police force and national bank. The death of Tito on May 4, 1980 coupled with a growing economic crisis, which was more pronounced in the southern republics, led to increased unrest resulting in massive protests in March 1981. One of the demands at this time was for *Kosovo's* status to be elevated to that of a republic – the seventh republic within Yugoslavia.

The demand for republic status met with strong opposition not only from Serbia but also from the two republics adjacent to Kosovo – Montenegro and *Macedonia*. The fear here was that the ethnic Albanians would attempt to link up with Albania, thus creating a *Greater Albania*. This situation stems back to World War II and Tito's attempt to increase the size of Yugoslavia at the expense of both Italy and Albania; taking control over both Triests in the north and *North Albania (Kosovo Province)*, separating it from Albania proper. At this time the majority of the populace in Kosovo was Albanian with sizeable minorities of Albanian descent residing in adjacent regions of Montenegro and *Macedonia* as well.

Hence, discontent between the Muslim Albanians and Orthodox Serbs in Kosovo stems back to the Second World War. The sectarian divide intensified following Tito's

death and the regional economy worsened in the 1980s and 1990s. During the economic crisis, Kosovo was the most impoverished province. Even then, Ibrahim Rugova, the leader of the Democratic League of Kosovo was able to keep a lid on violence through his policy of peaceful resistance. However, when Milosević ended both Kosovo and Vojvodina's status as an autonomous province in 1988, this led to the emergence of serious discontent especially in Kosovo. Rugova called for an independent Republic of Kosovo in 1991, sowing the seeds for the creation of the major resistance guerrilla force – the **Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA)**. The KLA soon overshadowed the peaceful resistance movement initiated by Ibrahim Rugova and with the 1995 Dayton Accord the KLA saw their opportunity to actively engage the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia without the distraction of the Bosnian and Croatian conflicts. The KLA initiated this segment of the “Third Balkan War” by attacking police stations and government offices in 1996. The KLA's fortunes changed in 1998 when the US and the United Kingdom changed their status from that of a *terrorist group* to that of *freedom fighters*. With the tacit approval from the United States through Richard Holbrook, KLA attacks intensified.

In an attempt to avert further bloodshed, international intervention efforts began on February 6, 1999, at the NATO-sponsored Rambouillet Conference outside Paris and a consensus on restoring Kosovo's status as an autonomous republic within the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was reached on February 23<sup>rd</sup>. However, the condition for an “invited international monitoring force in Kosovo” was rejected by the United States that insisted on a “forced military presence” not only in Kosovo but throughout the FRY. Neither Russia nor the FRY agreed with this condition and the unarmed peace monitors were withdrawn on March 22, 1999 in anticipation of a major NATO offensive. The US-led NATO bombing offense, named *Operation Nobel Anvil* began on March 24 and continued until June 11, 1999. The NATO operation involved some 1,000 aircrafts engaged in 38,000 combat missions representing the first military action for many NATO forces, including Canada, since the Korean War and it was the first for the Luftwaffe since the Second World War. This action was conducted without any UN Security Council approval and included both military and civilian sites. Some 20,000 bombs and missiles were deployed on targets in Kosovo, Belgrade, Vojvodina and even, Montenegro. Civilian targets included bridges, factories, power stations, homes, hospitals, schools, the Serbian state television broadcasting tower, petrochemical plants, and even the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade. This NATO action spelled the beginning of the end of Milosević's reign with the FRY army driven from Kosovo and replaced by the **NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR)** under a UN Security Council Resolution (1244) while the notorious KLA was renamed the *Kosovo Police Force* serving alongside the KFOR troops (French & Nikolic-Novakovic, 2012).

In the final analysis of the “Third Balkan War”, over 100,000 people died, both combatants and civilians with another million people displaced from their traditional homes, many having been placed in concentration camps or prisons where tens of thousands, both men and women, were subjected to sexual assaults, starved and beaten. Thousands still remain missing. Over 30,000 mine fields remain active today throughout the region resulting in continued deaths and injuries being inflicted mostly against children and youth (Ramet, 2006). And these conflicts did little to ameliorate the intensity of inter-sectarian hostilities and prejudices. Unfortunately, the Roma have come to feel the brunt of these prejudices.

## THE ROMA'S FATE IN THE BALKAN WAR AFTERMATH

### The lower Slav Republics: Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, Macedonia

The Roma living among the Serbs in Serbia, Montenegro or *Macedonia* shared a common history of abuse and ethnic cleansing following the breakup of the former Yugoslavia and therefore were better tolerated. That said, the Roma suffered most from the economic hardships subsequent to the strict trade embargo forced upon the Federation of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro) during both phases of the 1991–2002 Balkan War. And the Roma continued to be targeted by Serb Skin Heads and similar hate groups. UNICEF describes the living conditions in Serbia, Montenegro, and *Macedonia* as being similar to those in the rest of the breakaway republics – with substantial poverty, and unemployment and with many residing in makeshift communities (along the railroad tracks in Belgrade). Serbia, Montenegro and *Macedonia* also experienced massive Roma refugees fleeing Kosovo during, and following, the conflict there from 1996–2002. In Serbia, the Roma migrated to Belgrade and to Vojvodina Province. However, the choice for many Roma was Macedonia where they have long had a substantial population. Indeed, the largest Roma community in Europe resides in Shutka on the outskirts of the capital – Skopje. This migration was an outgrowth of the Balkan War itself. This segment of the Yugoslav Roma is predominately Muslim with roots with both the Kosovo Albanians and the Bosniaks (Clark, 2007).

The Muslim-identifying Roma in *Macedonia* refers to themselves as *Macedonian Egyptians*. Unlike Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia also has a substantial Romani middle-class and, like Serbia, has a compulsory primary educational program for its Roma population since completion of primary school is a prerequisite for employment by the state. Even then most Roma remain undereducated and impoverished, not due to a lack of state support but more due to the maintenance of their traditional lifestyle (Barany, 1995; Berger, 2005). Roma have established political clout in both Serbia and Macedonia. In the larger municipalities, the Roma in these southern Slav states hold de facto occupations such as recycling trash and construction debris. In January 2005, the Republic of Serbia adopted a National Action Plan (NAP) designed to improve the status of Roma in the areas of education, employment, housing and health care. The Deputy Prime Minister and the Poverty Reduction Strategy coordinate these efforts with representation from the National Council of Roma National Minority (NNRNM), parliament parties, Office for Roma Inclusion of Vojvodina, and Coordination Center for Roma Inclusion City of Belgrade (MRC, 2008; UNICEF-Macedonia; UNICEF-Montenegro; UNICEF-Serbia).

Kosovo, however, is the exception in the southern Slav states. Here, the Roma were caught up in the conflict and targeted for death or displacement. Kosovo, like Slovenia and Croatia, had a deliberate plan to cleanse itself of its Serbs and Roma populations. The Roma who identified with mainly with the Serbs fled to Vojvodina and Belgrade while others fled to established Roma communities in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. In the newly created Kosovo, the Muslim dominated government has relegated the remaining Roma to the status of “internally displaced people” hence denying them UN and other financial support designated for those groups holding “refugee”

status. UNICEF noted that the Roma in Kosovo are relegated to Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps that are mainly located in toxic environments where others do not care to reside. They note that displaced Roma families have been exposed to heavy metals and consequently have one of the highest levels of lead contamination in the bloodstream in the world (UNICEF-Kosovo; HRW, 1999).

### **Prevailing attitudes and prejudices**

Studies on ethnic stereotypes in Bosnia-Herzegovina measured the nature of continued out-group negative images harbored by Bosniak and Bosnian-Serbian youth. One study, conducted by the faculty at the University of Banja Luka, RS compared attitudes of youths in Sarajevo (Bosniaks) and Banja Luka (Bosnian-Serbs). These results showed significant inter-group negative stereotyping between the two samples – a clear reflection of their respective socialization within an increasingly polarized society. Another study, conducted by Srđan Puhalo, also from Banja Luka, focused on the ethnic biases of citizens of the Republic of Srpska (RS) and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) indicating a broader spectrum of ethnic dislike among adults within these two entities. The FBiH sample disliked Roma the most followed in descending order: Albanians, Macedonians, Serbs and Montenegrins. Slovenian and Croats were the least rejected groups among the FBiH sample. The Bosnian-Croats were the most adamant about their ethnic rejections than were their more populous Bosniaks within the overall FBiH sample. The RS sample rejected the Bosniaks the most followed by, in descending order: Roma, Croats, Slovenians, and Macedonians. The RS sample rejected Montenegrins (fellow Serbs) the least. The RS sample was more adamantly against inter-ethnic/sectarian marriages as well (Puhalo, 2003; Turjacinin, 2004; French & Nikolic-Novakovic, 2012). The sectarian divide has actually increased since the end of these conflicts, a phenomenon stressed in the 70<sup>th</sup> Rose-Roth Mission Report where they reported that the young people in the new republics carved out of the former Yugoslavia are even more provincial and narrow minded than their parents due mainly to the fact that many schools throughout the former Yugoslavia are segregated along sectarian lines fostering inter-group distrust and prejudices. Ironically, the states which are suffering the most from the current economic recession, Serbia and *Macedonia*, are the ones that have instituted efforts to better the lot of their Roma minority while the Slovenes, Croats, Bosniaks, and Kosovo Albanians continue to hold the Serbs, Roma and *Macedonians* in contempt (Grebearoy, 1992; Guy, 2001; Rose-Roth, 2009).

### **CONCLUSION**

During the Balkan wars 1991st to 2002nd year many have recorded a great suffering of the population, soldiers as well as civilians. Those wars evidenced the prospect about powerful oppressing the weak, regardless of the actual determinants of their identity. This statement especially applies to the case of minority groups, particularly Roma; vis –a– vis all parties involved in the conflicts had a negative attitude.

After the wars some progress has been made in protection of their rights, but in most cases insufficient or almost negligible.

In the area that was affected by the Balkan wars, all existing states are required to make additional efforts to protect the rights of minorities, but also to raise the level of their living conditions.

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