

MACEDONIA

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ROBERT G. CLEVELAND Economic Counselor and Director of USAID Mission Belgrade (1963-1965)

Robert G. Cleveland grew up in a family that traveled extensively abroad, spoke French at home, and had many European friends. He was appointed to the Foreign Service in 1946. His career included assignments in Bucharest, Paris, Sydney, Bangkok, and Belgrade. He was interviewed by Horace G. Torbert in 1990.

CLEVELAND: There were two memorable events during our stay in Yugoslavia:

The first was the assassination of President Kennedy, which of course was a terrible shock to us all. Marshal Tito was truly upset; he visited the Embassy for nearly an hour and talked about his memories and thoughts about the President. He had visited Washington earlier that year, and was a guest of the White House. He seemed to have developed a real admiration for Mr. Kennedy, so his feelings were obviously sincere. If my memory serves me, he also commented that when something happens to one Head of State, it could happen to others.

The other important incident was the earthquake at Skopje, the capital of Macedonia. It was a terrifying event, which almost completely leveled the city. We visited it as soon as possible and sent urgent messages to Washington recommending major assistance. A military medical group came down from Germany right away and did emergency work. At the same time, all the European countries arrived with all sorts of assistance. We had recommended that the military also provide shelter by setting up Nissen huts; we also proposed a financial package. The huts

finally arrived, later than we'd hoped. A team of Engineers did a fine construction job under difficult circumstances, particularly bad weather. The financial package was more or less of a fiasco.

On my staff at the time was Second Secretary Larry Eagleburger, currently the Deputy Secretary of State. We assigned Larry as POLAD to the military unit in Skopje. He was and is bilingual in Serbian. It was a difficult but essential job, and he performed brilliantly. The work was done fast, with less than the normal friction, and we ended up looking pretty good. I should perhaps add that Larry's tour was up shortly thereafter; on his departure, I gave him by far the best performance rating I ever gave anybody. His subsequent career, including Ambassador to Yugoslavia, has certainly confirmed my high opinion of him.

DELL PENDERGRAST
Yugoslavia Desk Officer, USIA
Washington, DC (1971-1972)

Mr. Pendergrast was born in Illinois in 1941. He received his BA from Northwestern University and his MS from Boston University. His positions abroad included Belgrade, Zagreb, Saigon, Warsaw, Brussels and Ottawa. Charles Stuart Kennedy interviewed him on June 24, 1999.

Q: Well, then, what was in store for you? They shortened your tour, and you were in Chicago with a wife and new son. Whither?

PENDERGRAST: Then I returned to Washington in the fall of 1971. I was assigned to the European Office of USIA as the Yugoslav Desk officer, building upon my experience before Vietnam, and also had responsibility for Bulgaria and Albania, but our activities in those countries were not significant. I mostly worked on Yugoslavia, one of USIA=s largest programs in the world.

Q: This was '7-

PENDERGRAST: 1971 and 1972. I spent only one year in that position, although it was a productive period, because I worked closely with the then USIS PAO in Belgrade, Pic Littell, in actively expanding the regional reach of our USIA programs and operations in Yugoslavia. At that time, of course, we, like the State Department, had posts only in Belgrade and Zagreb. Based on my personal experience in Yugoslavia, I believed that we really needed to move toward a more decentralized operation because of the increasing role the republics were going to play in the country. There was some resistance in the Department and elsewhere in the government, not an easy thing for someone relatively junior to deal with, but I worked different parts of the government and found some allies, with strong leadership from both USIA management and Pic Littell in Belgrade, we were able to establish new USIS - not State Department; just USIS at that point - operations in Sarajevo, Ljubljana, and Skopje. Later on we added one in Titograd as well. It was the first time that the U.S. government had reached out officially to the three republics:

Slovenia, Bosnia, and Macedonia. We were well ahead of the entire U.S. government on this issue. Curiously, the first director of the USIS program in Sarajevo, whom I helped to recruit and select, was a bright, young USIA officer, Vic Jackovich, who later would become the first U.S. ambassador to Bosnia.

Q: How did these new posts - let's take Skopje, for example - mean, how was it set up and what were you doing?

PENDERGRAST: They were small, modest information and library centers for a variety of cultural, educational, and media programs. There was no consular or other official function at all. This was actually part of the problem that we had to address in terms of negotiating, not just with the Yugoslavs, but also within the U.S. government because they were not going to be diplomatic posts and the people there would not have formal diplomatic status. In a communist country, this caused some security-conscious people a great deal of concern, assigning people without diplomatic protection to these remote republics in Yugoslavia. Trying to work out the modalities of official Americans in non-official positions was not very easy. Ultimately, we found a way of doing it where they had both diplomatic passports and regular passports and they were able to play use both passports depending on the occasion. It worked out, but it was not an easy thing to accomplish. But I'm glad we did it, because it was important for the United States to have this presence as Yugoslavia moved down the road toward decentralization and eventual unraveling.

Q: I would have thought that Slovenia, Ljubljana, you'd get much more of a response than you would in Skopje in those days, or maybe I'm wrong.

PENDERGRAST: No, because in many ways the Macedonians were thrilled that the U.S. government was giving them this recognition and unlike, Slovenia, which had proximity to the West, especially Austria and Italy, Macedonia was a very isolated republic and welcomed this new point of contact with the outside world. They were delighted to have a Macedonian-speaking USIA officer there. I think we really did accomplish a good deal by establishing these republic centers, a very rewarding part of my one year there in Washington.

Q: Obviously we're speaking from 1999, when we've just gone through a military exercise in Kosovo. Were we thinking, when we were in Macedonia, which has a fairly large I guess we'd call it today an Albanian population - were we thinking about them at the time?

PENDERGRAST: I don't think at that time the Albanian minority in Macedonia was something on our radar screen. The Albanians there were not that numerous in those days. That, of course, was not the case in Kosovo, where you had had violent demonstrations by Albanians back in 1968.

Q: Were you getting any reflections from Zagreb, because as I recall was it '71 where Croatian nationalism sort of spilled out and flags were flown at a concert and there were some demonstrations and Tito went bonkers?

PENDERGRAST: Yes, there was a major Yugoslav crackdown on Croatian nationalism in the early 1970s. It may have been a principal reason that Tito moved toward his own political decentralization in Yugoslavia during the 1970s, a significant power devolution to the republics. No doubt about it, in my view, he clearly feared nationalism, which three decades of Yugoslavia had not eroded. Wherever nationalism surfaced, whether in Kosovo or Croatia or even in Serbia, he responded vigorously, but I think that he was trying to have it both ways through repression and concession, and that's one reason he did move to decentralization.

Q: While you were on the Desk, were we playing close attention in trying to do what we could to keep the Brotherhood and Unity theme going as far as Yugoslavia was concerned?

PENDERGRAST: I don't think that there was really that much that the United States could do to strengthen unity in Yugoslavia. Our official policy of course remained one of support for a united Yugoslavia, a strategic buffer between the West and the Soviet Bloc. We welcomed an independent Yugoslavia and associated unity with independence. But I think that defensible strategic policy was based on wishful thinking more than reality. The superficial unity of Yugoslavia was fragile, particularly after the Stalinist threat in the 1940s and 1950s dissipated. The national divisions in Yugoslavia do not necessarily go back four or five hundred years, as some would argue but to the period of Ottoman rule in the 19th century and its gradual decline, which allowed different South Slav nationalities to follow different paths. Before World War II, the country was held together by the power of the Serbian monarchy, and then after World War II by the power of a communist dictator. But by the late 1960s, you could clearly sense that Yugoslavia as an authentic national unity was not taking hold. It was not something that was going to endure.

Q: Of course, too, we have to remember the time. You had the Soviet Union sitting there, and I always felt that our real policy was not particularly Yugoslavia, but if Yugoslavia got soft and started to split, it meant the Soviets would get involved - as, hell, they have just in the past couple of weeks in Kosovo. And so that was sort of a pressure that was keeping things together, and that's how we were viewing it.

PENDERGRAST: I think that's certainly a large part of it, particularly a sense that the Serbs, with their more pronounced Slavophile tendencies, would be more receptive to the Russians. It was certainly less true in other parts of Yugoslavia, especially Croatia and Slovenia, much more Western, Catholic, and a balancing force inside the Yugoslav federation. But the nationalist centrifugal forces were very strong in the late '60s and early '70s, and particularly with the end of the Cold War, the strategic impulse for a united, nonaligned Yugoslavia completely disappeared.

DAVID J. FISCHER
Political/Economic Officer
Sofia, Bulgaria (1972-1974)

Born in Connecticut and raised in Minnesota, Mr. Fisher was educated at Brown University, the University of Vienna, Austria and Harvard Law School He joined

the Foreign Service in 1961. His various assignments abroad took him to Germany, Poland, Sofia, Kathmandu, Dar es Salaam as well as to the, where he served as US ambassador from 1982 to 1985. Assignments at the Department of State in Washington include those dealing with US relations with China, with Public Affairs and with Arms Control issues. He was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy and Robert Pasturing in 1998.

Q: Did you ever get involved or in arguments or looking at what the Bulgarian language and what's being spoken in Macedonia?

FISCHER: Ah, the famous issue of what constitutes Macedonian!

Q: Was Macedonian a Bulgarian language?

FISCHER: Wars have been fought over this issue. In those days the Bulgarian position, of course, they recognized Yugoslavia, they had diplomatic relations, but every Bulgarian believed in their heart of hearts that the Yugoslav province of Macedonia was really Bulgarian. Macedonians were, on the one hand, grateful for what the Bulgarians had done in the 19th century to overthrow the Ottoman Empire. But, they also saw themselves as ethnically separate from Bulgaria and claimed that Macedonian was a unique language. All I know is that if you spoke Bulgarian you certainly could get by in Skopje and other areas of Yugoslav Macedonia.

**G. NORMAN ANDERSON
CSCE Representative
Skopje (1993)**

G. Norman Anderson studied Russian while he was in the Navy and later attended the Russian Institute at Columbia University. He entered the Foreign Service in 1960 and served in Lebanon, Germany, the Soviet Union, Morocco, Bulgaria, Tunis, Sudan, and Macedonia. He was interviewed by J. P. Moffat on June 18, 1996.

Q: You went to another exciting country when in 1993 you were nominated to represent the then CSCE in Macedonia. Or as we should say once for the record, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. This was a somewhat unusual assignment reflecting in many ways a changed world. Can you tell us how you came to be selected and what role you played in Macedonia?

ANDERSON: President Bush had taken the initiative for sending a mission to Macedonia. Two missions were sent out by the CSCE, the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe, in 1992. One went to Belgrade and had branches in what was left of Yugoslavia, in Kosovo, Vojodina and Sandjak. The other mission was sent to Macedonia. Macedonia at the time was under a great deal of pressure and nobody knew whether it could maintain its independence. It

had declared independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, at the same time as Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia did. Of course, everyone was worried that the war in Bosnia might spread to Macedonia.

Now the United States had not officially recognized Macedonia and some of the European countries had not either. There was no international diplomatic presence there. The CSCE was actually the first international presence. The CSCE mission was started by another American diplomat, Bob Frowick, who is now in charge of the elections in Bosnia, so I'm sure the Macedonian experience was very useful. In any case, I replaced an American out there. Bob Frowick had only been able to spend about two or three months there. The State Department wanted somebody to spend a longer time. So I was asked to go out and replace another person, Bill Whitman, also an American, who'd also been there just a very short time. I went out for six months, but ended up staying two years.

Our job was to try to promote stability and the territorial integrity of Macedonia. That was our mandate, but how to go about it was not spelled out. We, first of all, had to determine what the threats to stability were and also what to do about these various threats. In reality, there were all kinds of threats to stability and we had a very broad mandate. We became involved in one way or another in all these different issues. Meanwhile, the UN also sent troops to Macedonia. The CSCE mission was started toward the end of 1992 and UN forces arrived in January 1993. I finally got out there in March of 1993, so the UN was already in place when I arrived. No American troops were yet there though. Later on, about 500 American troops were added to the UN contingent. All for the sake of stability. Well, the CSCE had the first international political presence there. It was welcomed by the government because it was a sign of international support for independence of the country.

As I mentioned, there were various threats to stability, some of them were external threats and some were internal. The main threat the international community had in mind was the threat of Serbian military intervention. The fact was, the Serbs could roll into Skopje, the capital, within about two hours and nobody could stop them, not even the UN. The UN didn't have heavy weapons, it was a very lightly armed observer group. It was enough of a trip wire to keep the Serbs out and they were busy elsewhere. Some of the other threats came from other neighbors.

Bulgaria for example didn't really feel that Macedonia should be a separate entity. Bulgarians to this day believe that Macedonians are really Bulgarians. Now, the Macedonians don't agree with this, so there are tensions with Bulgaria. Also with respect to Albania, a large part of the population in Macedonia is ethnically Albanian and some of the Albanian elements there believe in Greater Albania, so there is always a threat of Greater Albania, which causes problems in the area.

Finally, Greece may have been more of a problem to the country than any of the other neighbors because the Greeks felt that there was an irredentist threat from Macedonia. Back in history Macedonia had been a much bigger country and part of it was northern Greece. The Greeks did not want to recognize an entity that had once extended all the way to Thessaloniki and most of northern Greece. The Greeks did not accept the name Macedonia. They objected to membership in international organizations. However, a compromise was reached on the UN and Macedonia came into the UN as the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. The Greeks did not want

Macedonia to be a member of the CSCE, or the European Union. At one point Greece closed the border and cut off supplies of oil to Macedonia, which created severe economic strains and in effect destabilized the country. Those were external threats.

There were also internal threats, ethnic tensions among various groups there, especially Albanians, there were Serbs, Slavic Muslims, gypsies (roma, as they were called) plus other groups which did not always get along well. So there were problems of ethnic tension. Finally, the economy was in very bad shape. A lot of people were out of jobs, had no way to support themselves. There was potential for unrest on the economic front. So in all these areas we monitored and tried to help the government maintain its stability.

Q: I gather in a sense, that it's quite a success story, Macedonia.

ANDERSON: Fortunately, Macedonia had good leaders, especially President Gligorov, who is very moderate. Ironically, most of the leaders there are former communists. It turned out that they were the most moderate elements in the country compared to some of the right wing nationalists who indeed did want to go to Thessaloniki and take over, ideally speaking. The right wing elements were a very serious threat to the stability of the country.

Q: So your job was really in large part exhortatory and representing the US and international, well more correctly the international community.

ANDERSON: That's right. We represented the international community. The United States later recognized Macedonia and right now, in July 1996, is sending its first ambassador out there after having had an interest section or liaison office, as it was called.

Q: ... credit for bringing about this happy situation, particularly deeming the elections to have been free and fair.

ANDERSON: Our CSCE mission did, I think, contribute to stability. For example, we helped to conduct a census which was very politically sensitive there. The Albanian ethnic group in particular thought it was undercounted. But we helped to monitor the census so it was conducted properly, along with the European Union.

Finally in 1994, presidential and parliamentary elections were held and our mission was charged with the task of monitoring the elections. We called in a lot of outside observers from CSCE countries and set up monitoring. We also went around urging the various political groups to participate. The right wing elements, who were a something of a threat to stability, did participate in the first round of elections because we exhorted them to do that. They had been telling us that the elections would be rigged. So finally, they maintained that the first round was rigged and refused to participate in the second round.

The CSCE found that the elections, even though there were some irregularities, were basically fair and free. We in our final report and press conference on the matter, we stated that, despite some irregularities, the elections were valid. Now the right wing parties did not like that pronouncement and they organized various rallies and demonstrations. But we urged them not to

resort to violence and I think we had an influence in keeping the situation calm. In any case, the elections were fair and free. I believe they did lead to a further period of stability in the country.

Q: You, certainly, next perhaps to Jack Matlock must be the premier linguist in the recent Foreign Service what with Arabic, French, Russian, Spanish, Ukrainian, Bulgarian and Macedonian to your credit. Is there any hope for others to follow in such a pattern? To what do you credit you linguistic ability?

ANDERSON: Well, it was all by chance, in a way, according to assignments. I think, obviously, languages are very useful. You don't need them until you really need them. You could probably get by with English in many situations, these days, but in a crisis, you may not be able to get by with English and you may have to rely on some exotic language. For example, in the coup in Sudan, if you didn't understand the Arabic radio broadcasts, you didn't know what was going on. Also the new leaders did not speak English, so my contacts with them had to be in Arabic. A foreign language is definitely a window on the culture and thinking of such leaders and makes for a much better understanding of developments.

RAZVIGOR BAZALA
Public Affairs Officer
Skopje (1994)

Mr. Bazala was born in Germany but immigrated to the United States while he was still young. He joined the Foreign Service in 1970 and served in Warsaw, South Vietnam, New Delhi, Belgrade, Jamaica, Macedonia, Bosnia, and Washington, DC including working as a special assistant to the White House for the Iran-Contra Affairs. Mr. Bazala was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in July of 2011.

BAZALA: Just days after I got back to the office after the Warsaw interlude the Macedonia country affairs officer who occupied the office next to mine asked me in passing whether I would be interested in a brief assignment in Macedonia. She did not give me a hint why she asked and I off-handedly said I would, not foreseeing circumstances that made the prospect likely over the near term. A few days later she informed me that the European division intended to curtail the current PAO's assignment early for inadequate performance. I was asked to replace her until her successor completed language training four months later.

The PAO's inability to manage a USIS operation needlessly demoralized her fully competent staff, which undermined the effectiveness of post programs and their implementation. It was a sad ending, but several years later personnel assigned the same FSIO to another PAO posting with similar consequences unfortunately. With my previous service in Yugoslavia, interest in the job and the enthusiasm of the Chief of Mission in Skopje about my availability, the decision to pull her out was a foregone conclusion. That I did not speak Macedonian was not a problem; during the Tito era Serbo-Croatian was taught in all schools and almost everyone in Macedonia was familiar with the language.

I had almost no time to consider the pluses and minuses of the job and only a general orientation to circumstances on the ground. I dealt daily with posts and USIA programs in Albania, Bulgaria, Romania and Serbia, but knew very little about current developments in Macedonia. I did, however, know the Chief of Mission who had been assigned there just a few months earlier and was impressed with him. We had served together on an interagency task force that he chaired in the State Department Operations Center regarding trade policy with and sanctions against Serbia.

Days later I was on a jet bound for Macedonia. I found serving as PAO Skopje to be a very challenging, interesting and rewarding interim assignment. Taking the job meant that my service as USIA's AFSA representative was interrupted, but by then a full time professional AFSA staffer was based at USIA to take care of administrative issues, and several other members offered to fill in for me on the AFSA board during my overseas absence.

Macedonia declared its independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, and the U.S. recognized it as an independent state early in 1994. The name of the country, however, raised hackles in Greece, an ally of the U.S. as a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The Greeks consider Macedonia a part of Greece and object to another nation calling itself by that name. They proposed a compromise suggesting the nation be called the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia or FYROM, an awkward designation to which Macedonia objected. The issue has more or less been resolved now that the F and Y have been dropped leaving ROM as the Republic of Macedonia. The early contention over its name explains to some extent why the U.S. diplomatic presence in Skopje initially was deemed a mission and not an embassy during my tenure.

The temporary quarters of the U.S. mission occupied two floors of a rather unimpressive modern four or five story office building near the center of the capital. USIS was in the same facility the Skopje branch operation of P&C Belgrade occupied during the Tito era. It was located in a ground level office suite in one of the contemporary high rise structures built after the 1963 earthquake. Their semi-circular arrangement symbolized the wall around the original center of the city. In addition to the PAO, the staff numbered seven Macedonian employees, most of them veterans from the Tito era. During my Belgrade tour more than a decade earlier, I had met them briefly during stopovers in Skopje.

One of the most uncomfortable experiences in my career was the week of overlap prior to the departure of the PAO I was replacing. Coping with her tears and denials of any mal-, mis- or non-feasance was a tedious and almost unbearable chore. Listening to her rational for her leadership shortcomings was embarrassing. It was immediately clear that my primary task was to do whatever was necessary to restore the self-confidence of the post's professional staff that she had driven out of them. I was able to do that because I was aware of the skills and talents they brought to their jobs and demonstrated respect for those capabilities.

I was friendly, informal and related comfortably with each of them. They soon learned that I was easy to approach and I sought their views about how to attain the goals and objectives of the USIS country plan. That was a document prepared by all posts annually to provide Washington a listing of specific activities they intended to implement and the tools required to do the job,

including grants for academic exchanges, visits by American experts to address country plan themes, and publications, video and audio products to be added to the library. The plans also served as the basis for determining the level of funding the Agency would provide for posts' budgets.

I was pleased that my leadership restored morale and stimulated an increase in staff productivity almost immediately after I assumed responsibility for running the post. In particular, I encouraged the recently hired media assistant and IT professional to unleash their talents to apply cutting edge -- as of twenty years ago -- digital communication technology to post activities. That included delivery via email of the USIA daily press summary to all media in the country, leading government officials and mission staff and development of a web site for the U.S. mission. Just a few years earlier, the summary was called the Wireless File transmitted to posts via outdated teletype machines on spools of paper. Selected items had to be cut into page-length segments, photo-copied and delivered by the USIS staff driver to the limited number of sites he could reach before noon. Bad weather sometimes caused the transmission to be garbled generating useless random strings of letters, numerals and symbols.

I spent a considerable amount of time working with the chief of mission to encourage VOA to establish a Macedonian language division. Interestingly enough, the Post's press assistant, who married an American he met while she was serving as a Peace Corps volunteer in Macedonia, wound up in Washington and was hired as the first director of VOA's Macedonian language service several years later.

The USIS staff and I worked well together conducting programs to use all the resources the Agency's had available for post-communist redevelopment, primarily SEED money. I researched numerous proposals for grants and provided resources to a number of institutions dealing with media, academic exchanges, professional exchanges, speaker programs, governance under the rule of law and the promotion of civic education. I thrived on being PAO in Skopje, brief as the experience was. It allowed me to demonstrate that I could walk in on short notice and turn an East European country's USIS program around.

I thoroughly enjoyed my four months in Skopje although rattling around the four bedroom PAO residence as winter approached put me in the mood to wrap things up and get back home. Before then I had a number of opportunities to travel around Macedonia. One allowed me to visit towns close to the capital while serving as a monitor for the nation's parliamentary elections. As I prepared to depart, the chief of mission asked if I would be interested in becoming his deputy when the mission in Skopje was designated an embassy. My response was positive of course, but he was assigned elsewhere before that happened.

VICTOR D. COMRAS
Chief of Mission
Skopje (1994-1996)

Victor D. Comras was born in New York State in 1943. Comras graduated from Georgetown University in 1964, the University of Florida Law School in 1966, and promptly joined the Foreign Service. While in the Foreign Service, Comras served overseas in Zaire, Nigeria, South Africa, France, Canada and Macedonia. He also worked on the Law of the Sea negotiations. Comras was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2002.

Q: What happened regarding the flag and the name of the country and all that?

COMRAS: Macedonia agreed to change the flag and it now uses a design which some have said looks very much like the Japanese battle flag. It no longer looks like the Star of Vergina. It is a very beautiful flag. There's a sun with rays on a red background. There were clear statements made in the text of the agreement that Macedonia had no intention of allowing any support from its territory for any activities that would run against the security of Greece and there was an agreement with respect to the use of disputed symbols. The two sides agreed they would continue to negotiate on the issue related to the name. Greece would continue to refer in its way to Macedonia and they agreed that differences with respect to the name would not otherwise inhibit their relationships.

Q: One area you hadn't mentioned - and I know because of the history - Bulgaria had a rather strong feeling about Macedonia and claiming that Macedonia was Bulgaria and territorial claims. Had that dissipated by this time?

COMRAS: No. These were all very real issues for Macedonia and for Bulgaria. There were so many different layers of issues. The country itself is so politically and ethnically complex. There are a number of groups, minorities and perspectives in Macedonia. There is a very large Albanian population. There is a significant group of people who believe that they are Bulgarian rather than Macedonian. I don't want to play that up too big. But it's not insignificant. There are those who view themselves as Serbs. The fact of the matter is that a fairly substantial number of Serbs settled in Macedonia when it was known as South Serbia just after the first Balkan wars. There is an enormous amount of intermarriage between the Macedonians and the other Yugoslavs nationalities. The Macedonian language itself is an issue. And there is Bulgaria's historic claims to Macedonia. These claims date back before the Treaty of San Stephano when Bulgaria thought that it had gotten all of Macedonia incorporated into Bulgaria. That terms of that treaty, as you know, were later undone by the Conference of Berlin. The Bulgarians fought the Balkan wars in part to protect their claim to Macedonia. They fought the second Balkan war because they didn't get what they thought they should in the first Balkan war. They fought the First World War in part to get Macedonia back. They allied themselves with the Germans and fought in the Second World War in part to get Macedonia back. Probably those wars, and particularly World War II, convinced most Macedonians that they didn't want to be Bulgarian. The Bulgarian regime was tough on the Macedonians in terms of their culture, language, and other issues.

Recent Macedonian nationalism can be traced to the World War II period when Macedonians established their own underground to fight against the Bulgarians. Tito wisely, asked them to join him with the promise that he would give them an independent Macedonian republic at the

end of the conflict. The Macedonian underground joined Tito on those terms. Tito, true to his promise, after World War II, created the Republic of Macedonia as one of the 5 republics of Yugoslavia. With Milosevic in power in Belgrade, and the disintegration of the rest of Yugoslavia, Macedonia decided on its own independence in 1991.

The Language issue had a life of its own. It became a barrier to normal relationship between Bulgaria and Macedonia. This was true even during the first part of my own stay in Skopje. They couldn't finalized any treaties or agreements between them because the Bulgarians would never accept that the agreement was produced in both a Bulgarian and a Macedonian version. The Bulgarians maintained "There's only one language." This took on some tragic-comedy aspects when one of the cultural ministers of Bulgaria said, "Oh, no, Macedonian is only a Bulgarian dialect" just a couple of days before President Gligorov was scheduled to meet with the Bulgarian president in Sofia. So, when President Gligorov arrived in Sofia, he brought his translator. The Bulgarians wouldn't let the translator in the room. So Gligorov refused to enter also. The language issue is likely to remain for a long time. The Macedonians and Bulgarians did finally get around the treaty blockage by agreeing that each treaty would leave it to each side as to whether or not there were 2 languages or one language.

Bulgaria has renounced its territorial claims to Macedonia but continues to take a big interest in Macedonian issues.

There is also the Serbian factor. Serbia considered Macedonia to be South Serbia since the Balkan wars. Many in Serbia resisted Tito's actions creating a Macedonian republic. This included the Serbian Orthodox Church. They viewed Macedonia as a Tito creation. There are a lot of Serb nationalists who believe that Macedonia ought today be part of Serbia.

Then there is the Albanian issue. Around a quarter to a third of the people living in Macedonia are Albanian. This creates a strong tie-in to issues related to Albania and Kosovo.

There is also considerable tension between these various ethnic and political groups All of this piles into the complexity of Macedonia's ethnic, cultural and political/historical mix.

Q: You were there from when to when?

COMRAS: I arrived in Skopje in the beginning of April of 1994 and I stayed until the summer of 1996. This was a very critical and event-filled period for Macedonia, and for our diplomatic mission. We grew from being a small two officer Liaison office into a full blown Embassy with all the trimmings. We established full diplomatic relations with Macedonia in September 1995, and received authority to upgrade the status of our mission to an embassy in February 1996. We officially opened our new embassy chancery building in May 1996 with Madeline Albright presiding over the ceremonies.

Q: What was your view of Gligorov as the head of this country?

COMRAS: Gligorov was something of a legend in his own time. He's a great man by any standard. He's truly the father of modern independent Macedonia. In my view he showed

enormous courage and political wisdom. He was able to bring Macedonia out of Yugoslavia peacefully. He convinced the Albanians and the Macedonians that they had a similar stake in a peaceful Macedonia. He convinced the Macedonians that they had to move towards democracy, towards a market economy, towards recognition of their nation as a Western oriented country. He made it a high priority for Macedonia to do the necessary things to gain eventual full integration into Europe and into NATO. The force of his personality and character were very positive in bringing his country through an enormously difficult period and allowing it to survive against difficult odds.

Gligorov is also a very stubborn man who sometimes allowed his biases to complicate situations. Perhaps the most important serious consequences came from his strong distrust of the Greeks. He had this intense belief that issues such as flags and symbols were essential to the core of Macedonian statehood. He felt strongly attached to the symbols as symbols that define Macedonian nationalism. I found him to be almost intransigent and for long periods, on issues that seemed to have no real importance. Macedonia has not suffered from having a new flag, or from abandoning the use of certain symbols claimed by the Greeks.

While fending off the claims of his neighbors, Gligorov tried to steer a policy of polite friendliness and equidistance in his relations with all of his neighbors. He wanted to maintain the same kind of relationship with Bulgaria, Greece, Albania, Serbia, and Turkey. He would call this the “policy of equidistance.” “We’ll be equally distant to each of these countries and equally cordial to each as well,” he would say.

Q: Turkey, although it didn’t have a common border, it still had a long history. Did that have any reflection in Macedonia?

COMRAS: Yes. Macedonian-Turkish relations were always very good. The one issue that sometimes created problems related to the Albania. Turkey wanted to be one of Albania’s protectors in Europe. But the Turks were viewed as a potentially important investor and partner for Macedonia. Istanbul is an extremely important port for the whole south Balkan region. It has taken on great importance as a commercial entrance and exit point for Macedonia. This was especially the case when Thessaloniki was closed off to them during the embargo period. The Greek embargo did lead to an even more cordial relationship than might otherwise have been the case between Turkey and Macedonia.

Q: Thessaloniki would be the normal port for Macedonia and it was seen as problematic. Therefore you have a strong alternative.

COMRAS: Right. The port of Durres in Albania was insufficient to handle Macedonian needs. Also there was only a very poor road through the mountains connecting Macedonia to Durres. Istanbul became a much more important port for Macedonia.

Q: When you were there, what was the local Albanian situation and how did that play out?

COMRAS: The Albanian situation was one of the most challenging issues for Macedonia and for my own efforts to toward maintaining inter-ethnic peace and stability in Macedonia. Remember

this was a period of grave risk and great uncertainty throughout the Balkan region. The Bosnian war was raging, conflict was simmering in Croatia, tensions were rising in Kosovo, Serbia was straining under sanctions, Macedonia was under severe political and economic pressure from Greece, and Macedonia's Slavic and Albanian populations were beginning to face off against each other. All those living in Macedonia felt the tension and insecurity that surrounded them.

A great many of the Albanians living in Macedonia can trace their roots there back for centuries. But many are also new arrivals. They moved to Macedonia during the 1980s Kosovo disturbances. Both groups were under great pressure from the Macedonian majority who feared and distrusted them. The Macedonian government refused to grant Macedonian citizenship to the more recent arrivals. This became a major bone of contention between the two communities.

Before the breakup of Yugoslavia there was free movement across the Kosovo - Macedonia border. It was like moving between Maryland and Virginia. With the fall of Yugoslavia a new border was created between Kosovo (which was in Serbia) and Macedonia. The Kosovo and the Macedonian Albanian communities were closely linked by family, cultural and commercial ties. They viewed themselves as part of the same Albanian community during the Yugoslav period. Now they were being defined by the authorities as separate communities. They no longer had freedom of movement across that border, and the Albanians that had come into Macedonia felt they were being deprived of their status and civil rights.

The Macedonian government tried to define their citizenship in terms of how long they had been in Macedonia. This was an attempt to mask the real size of the Albanian minority in Macedonia.

The Macedonians held many of the same prejudices against the Albanians as the Serbs. They were worried about the political and national aspirations of the Albanians and what that might mean for Macedonia's own statehood and nationalism. Perhaps the tragedy in Bosnia served as a lesson to Macedonia and to its leadership that ethnic conflict could bring them only disaster and the possible loss of their newly won statehood. Macedonia's Slavic and Albanian leaders understood that the relationship between their two communities had to be managed carefully and that tensions had to be minimized. President Gligorov understood this and welcomed Albanian leaders into a participatory role in his government.

The Albanians also recognized that they had a stake in Macedonia's independence and that they were much better off in a liberal Democratic Macedonia seeking entry into mainstream Europe than they would ever be under Slobodan Milosevic's repressive nationalist regime in Belgrade. They accepted Gligorov's outstretched hand and took up various ministerial portfolios in the Macedonian Government.

The message I repeated over and over again to my Slavic Macedonian interlocutors at all levels of government and business was that they had to recognize that they had a limited window of opportunity which could close on them at any time.

During the period I was there (1994-1996) the Albanians in Macedonia had no desire to join up with their brethren in Kosovo. It was evident to them at that point in time that those in Kosovo really had it much worse. If anything, they were afraid of seeing Milosevic take control again in

Macedonia. They didn't want to have a Belgrade regime dominating events in Macedonia. They didn't have any desire to hook up with Albania. Nor did they want to hook up with Albania which was really a political and economic basket case during that period. What they wanted, and what they needed, was to feel secure in their own towns and villages in Macedonia.

This is why the UN peacekeeping mission in Macedonia was so important. This is why it was critical that Americans were there along with the Scandinavians. The Albanian community leaders knew that so long as these forces were there, the Serbs would not be able to move south into Macedonia. Both communities believed that the Americans and the Scandinavians also would not contenance growing internal strife between their communities, nor allow the internal situation to get too much out of hand. This gave them at least a minimum sense of security, and a willingness to try and work together. The presence of the UN was really critical to allowing both groups to sleep at night.

But, the situation was fragile at best. We all knew that Kosovo could blow up at any moment and change everything. If Kosovo erupted, it would (and did) have enormous implications for Macedonia. Also the situation would also change over time in Albania itself, perhaps turning Albania into a more important pole of attraction for Macedonia's Albanians.

It was imperative that the Macedonian government recognized, and work toward making the Albanian minority recognize that had a stake in a peaceful and stable Macedonia.

There were at least four matters that the Macedonian government had to address to great urgency if they were to keep the Albanians within the fold of a Macedonian state.

The first was the Albanian language issue. The Macedonian Slavs had to recognize the importance of language and culture to the Albanians. They were not ever going to be able to turn the Albanians into Macedonian Slavs. They would always be Macedonian Albanians. The best they assure they would become cooperative citizens within Macedonia was to recognize their language and cultural identity, and to give it some standing within Macedonia. This meant providing ample educational opportunities from primary school through University in both languages.

Q: You might point out that the Albanian language and the Macedonian language are quite different.

COMRAS: Very different. Macedonian is a Slavic dialect. Albanian (also known as shqip) is a distinct proto-indo-European language.

The second major issue is education. The Albanians in Macedonia have legitimate grievances regarding insufficient government support for education in their communities. Education is essential and the Albanian communities must be given their fair share for schools, teachers and supplies.

The third issue is Jobs. They've got to have their share in the economy and in the government and in the government positions.

The fourth is public works. They must be given their fair share also for community service construction, roads and other public works. The Albanian villages are among the poorest in Macedonia. This process is also assisted by the fact that many Albanians have families elsewhere in Europe and the United States that are also sending back remittances to assist the local economies. I was always surprised to see how many houses were under private construction. Albanian workers, returning from their overseas jobs were slowly building themselves houses - a little bit each summer.

These are the key four issues. When Macedonian government works to address them, they make progress in dealing with the Albanian community. Both communities benefit. If they hold back, and concentrate only on their Macedonian constituency the whole country will suffer.

I should say that many Macedonians did not agree with the four points I was making. They maintained that anything that reenforces Albanian education and culture will also reenforce Albanian separatism. They believe that this will only lead to a division of their country, and that the Albanians will eventually try to go off on their own. While that might be a long term scenario, it was not a realistic perspective in the short term. That is why it is so important for the Macedonian majority to ensure that the Albanian minority has a real positive stake in Macedonia.

One of the main incidents that peaked tensions between the two communities was the Albanian decision to establish their own Albanian Language University in Tetevo. The initial reaction of the Macedonian government was to take it down - by force, if necessary. That turned out to be a major fiasco that almost caused civil war. However, moderate leaders on both sides prevailed. The government pulled its forces back. Rather than confront the Albanians on the issue, they merely declared the University as illegal and without any official recognition. Subsequently, the University was folded into the established Education framework, but that came many years after I left Skopje.

The history behind the creation of the Albanian is instructive. During the Yugoslav era, the University of Pristina, in Kosovo, served as the principal Albanian language University. There was also a University of Tirana in Albania, but that was off-limits for Yugoslav Albanians until the fall of the Hoxa regime.

Slobodan Milosevic, as part of his repression of the Kosovo Albanians closed their schools, as well as the University of Pristina. This meant that there were no University level courses taught in Albanian open to the Albanians of Kosovo and Macedonia.

The Albanian Community in Macedonia approached President Gligorov with the request that he establish a Albanian language Teachers College at the University of Skopje. They reasoned that the Macedonian Constitution envisaged Albanian language schools in Albanian communities at least through secondary school. However, this required the availability of trained teachers who could teach in Albanian. Gligorov agreed in principle, but, unfortunately, adopted a 'go slow' approach. When the Macedonian government finally decided to create a pedagogic institute, a school to train teachers in Albanian, the chancellor of the university resisted the decision. He had

other development plans for the University. They should have thrown him out right away and put in a new rector, but they hesitated and it became a political issue.

The Albanians needed a university somewhere. They had a number of unemployed professors from the University of Pristina. So they decided to raise some money within their own community and do their own thing. The Macedonian government over-reacted and a crisis was born.

The initial government reaction was to try to destroy it by knocking down the classroom buildings and declaring the school illegal. They created a major crisis. They had nobody on their side. I played a direct hand in bringing them around to a more reasonable approach. I warned Gligorov that “If you’re ever going to aspire to being part of Europe, part of Western political institutions, then you’ve got to stop this action. I argued that education was a human right and that the steps the government was taking were not consistent with its stated policies on these issues. Nor were they conducive to support from the United States or the European Union. After all, the University was a private undertaking, on private property and did not engage the Macedonian government in any way. I told him that while he had the right to deny the University any official character or charter, and did not have to accredit it or assist it in any way, it would be a big mistake to try and destroy it or make it a criminal act to attend. The pressure I put on Gligorov, in the name of the United States, helped him decide to pull back and to establish a policy of ignoring the University, which his government simply declared “illegal.”

Eventually the Macedonian government began to tolerate the University. Several years after I left Macedonia, then President Boris Boris Trajkovski signed a decree approving the University of Tetevo as a multilingual institution. I’m proud to say that I was a positive force in resolving this sensitive issue.

End of reader