

BULGARIA AND THE WAR IN KOSOVO

On 4th May 1999 the Bulgarian parliament formally ratified an agreement to allow NATO aircraft to use the country's air space during hostilities with Yugoslavia. The votes were 154 for and 83 against.

As the ruling Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) has consistently supported NATO's bombing campaign against Serbia and as the party has an overall majority in parliament the outcome of the vote was not unexpected.

However, whereas in neighbouring Romania the opposition Socialist Party supports NATO membership this is not the case with Bulgaria. It is also commonly accepted that public opinion is against NATO's bombing campaign; people's concerns were only heightened when a missile accidentally tore through the roof of a private dwelling in the suburbs of the capital Sofia on 30th April. It was the sixth misguided bomb since 24th March to hit Bulgarian territory.

Three BHHRG members visited Sofia at the end of April 1999 to discuss the war and its effect on Bulgaria with politicians, journalists and ordinary people. Leaving aside the different political attitudes to NATO everyone has to face the fact that the war is costing the country millions of dollars in lost trade through the closure of the Danube to traffic and the inability for commercial vehicles to transit Yugoslavia, the quickest route to Western markets.

The political scene in Bulgaria today

During the winter of 1996-7 political turmoil hit three Balkan countries: opposition demonstrations became a daily event in both Serbia and Bulgaria while neighbouring Albania was heading for social turmoil caused by the collapse of pyramid investment schemes. As events turned out Serbia's 'Balkan Spring' proved short-lived as the three opposition leaders fell out among themselves and the momentum for change was lost.

But large demonstrations led by students and trade union organizations did manage to bring down the ruling Socialist Party government in Sofia even though it was only two years into its mandate – no Bulgarian government has lasted its full term since the collapse of communism in 1990.

The reason for popular hostility to the Socialists was the dramatic worsening of the economic situation in the country where inflation raged at 300% p.a. in late 1996. It was not surprising, therefore, that in the elections that took place on 19th April 1997 the opposition UDF was returned to power with a large majority in the parliament. In November 1996 the UDF's candidate, Petar Stoyanov had won the presidential election.

Although the new Bulgarian government was courted by Western institutions and investors in the hope that it would be more open to foreign business than its predecessor, little has happened to date. For example, privatization of key utilities is still in the pipe-line and arguments continue with the EU over the safety and future of Bulgaria's Kozloduy nuclear power plant.

Critics go further. According to Petar Vlaskov, editor of *Monitor* newspaper, the Bulgarian economy has been brought to its knees by the policies of both the Socialist and UDF led governments. 80% of the country's consumer goods are imported and its once thriving agriculture is in serious decline: according to the International Agricultural Institute fewer seeds have been planted by Bulgaria's farmers this year than for 120 years.

While people talk about the UDF as a 'right-wing' party Vlaskov says that all the country's political parties are on the left. Having talked to representatives of both right and left the BHHRG found one consistent thread in their conversations: that someone from 'outside' should come to the country's rescue with a pot of gold. The EU is seen as the prime cornucopia out of which all prosperity will flow. In this sense the political mind-set has not changed since communist times, only now the all-providing 'Party' is replaced by 'Europe'. In fact, the language used by UDF spokesmen with their talk of 'pan-European structures' and 'models of integration' is as dead and meaningless as the former communist *langue de bois*.

NATO and Bulgaria

While right and left concur in their desire for EU membership they disagree on NATO membership. This disagreement has become a chasm since hostilities broke out in Kosovo.

It has been clear for some time that the US, in particular, would like a solution to what they see as the Balkan problem. State Department experts have talked about replacing weak Balkan states with a loose federation of countries, or preferably, regions. Debates about NATO taking place in Bulgarian political circles often allude to a 'south-east European security zone'. The idea is to tie the country's future into a new political arrangement with NATO as its strategic corner-stone. In preparation for its future role the Bulgarian armed forces are presently being reduced in size, much to the alarm of the government's critics. Bulgaria's cooperation with Operation Allied Force is viewed as the country's first test for future full membership of the organization.

The Left's opposition to this policy is based on the threat they see posed to Bulgarian national sovereignty. Spokesmen regularly point out the following:

- The lack of consultation that has taken place in the country,
- the failure to provide for any proper parliamentary debate before key decisions on access to NATO air space was granted, and
- the dishonesty of politicians who denied that such a request had ever been made by NATO in the first place. For example, on 9th March the government denied that it had been approached over the question of NATO overflights. Even on 5th April US deputy secretary of state, Strobe Talbott said that NATO **had not asked Bulgaria for the use of its air space nor did it have any plans to do so in the future.**

On 1st May the traditional May Day parade took place in Sofia. BHHRG members watched thousands of people march peacefully through the centre of Sofia protesting against NATO's aggression (as they see it) against Serbia. Unlike Serbia itself the Bulgarian media has given much coverage to the suffering of the Kosovo Albanians.

NATO missiles fall on Bulgaria

Since the start of NATO's bombing campaign on 25th March reports had circulated that stray missiles had fallen in areas close to the border with Serbia. However, on 30th April a HARM missile (high speed anti-radiation missile) tore through the roof of a suburban house in the Gorna Banya suburb of Sofia and landed in a near-by street. The owner of the street and her small son were in their kitchen at the time and missed by inches being seriously hurt by falling debris. The top part of the house was completely destroyed and walls and ceilings in the house proper damaged.

BHHRG members visited the house and talked with the owner, Diana Vrbevy, who speaks fluent English and works for the BBC in Sofia. Although the Bulgarian president had visited them 15 minutes after the attack she had received no formal apology from either the American or British embassies in Sofia. As far as she knew no one from a NATO embassy

had visited the house. People in the area were wary – understandably so as a police car turned up soon after the BHHRG arrived. Its occupants spoke to two men in an unmarked car parked near the ruined house.

Although the vote to ratify NATO's use of Bulgarian airspace had not taken place on 30th April many questioned the version of events that stated that the missile had been fired over Serbia and 'gone astray'. Its trajectory and speed indicated that it could only have been unleashed by a plane within a 25 mile radius – well inside Bulgarian air space.

The media in Bulgaria

State TV and radio in Bulgaria are under tight government control although there are several cable channels. There is a wide variety of newspapers although they do not reach the sizeable audiences achieved by television. Government newspapers, like *Democratia*, support the war, those of the centre and left do not. However, the largest circulation dailies *24 Chas* and *Trud* are cautious in their approach – they are vying with one another to be taken over by a German publisher which requires a government licence only one of which can be awarded. As no decision has yet been made their independence is somewhat compromised. *Monitor*, a recently-formed, paper is the most independent in outlook.

A surprising ingredient in the Bulgarian media scene is provided by the satirical TV show *Hushove*. The programme has been in existence for nearly ten years – for the first 7 years they appeared on state television. However, 3 months into the new government's term of office the show was taken off state TV and it now broadcasts on a private cable channel. *Hushove's* producer, Luben Dilov, also told the BHHRG that businesses were under constant pressure not to advertise on the show. The government has a powerful weapon through its control over the allocation of licenses which companies need to obtain before operating in Bulgaria.

The producers of *Hushove* also run other showbiz outlets in the country and have a large, well-educated audience. BHHRG members attended the pre-recording of the latest show on 31st April in a small night club in Sofia. There were plenty of anti-NATO jokes (rapturously received by the mainly the student audience) and the acts were as sophisticated and amusing as any in similar Western satirical programmes. Perhaps the Bulgarian government knows that satire can be a remarkable tool in mobilising public opinion - the British satirical show *That was the Week that Was* undoubtedly damaged the Macmillan government in the early 1960s. However, despite complaints from the Conservative government of the time the BBC never removed it from the air waves.

The Political Future

Despite its overwhelming parliamentary majority the Bulgarian government has suffered a severe set-back with the war in Kosovo and its involvement with the NATO action. Economic hardship has already been mentioned.

However, the Socialist opposition still suffers from a lack of credibility stretching back to its perceived disastrous policies when last in power. The government has been crafty in labelling the Left as "reds" composed of the relics of the old Communist Party structures. Many people, the young in particular, are loathe to be seen as associating themselves with such people. The UDF is not without its own Marxist-Leninist relics. For example, the prime minister, Ivan Kostov, taught Marxist-Leninist economics before 1989 and is alleged to have been fervently opposed to the policies associated with *perestroika*.

There is, therefore, room for new political structures which we were assured will appear in the aftermath of the war over Kosovo. The shape and orientation of such a movement (or party) is still undetermined but its appearance cannot be doubted. Whether it will be as pro-NATO and the EU as the present political establishment remains to be seen.

There are also political developments of another kind underway. Bulgaria's relationship with FYROM (Macedonia) has been somewhat tense due to irredentist groups which deny any historical difference between the two countries. Macedonian nationalists are now coalition partners in the government in Skopje and their party, VMRO, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization, has a partner organization in Sofia. In February the governments of Bulgaria and Macedonia reached agreement on the use and description of their respective languages seen by many in both countries as fundamentally the same.

VMRO representatives were active in the demonstrations that brought down Bulgaria's Socialist government in 1997. After the April election, members of the organization were awarded several seats in parliament cooperating with the ruling party.

Until now VMRO operates in Bulgaria as a social, cultural and trading organization but, Anatoly Velichkov a member of the Executive Council, told the BHHRG that it expects to register as a political party in the next few weeks.

As an active political movement VMRO may start to agitate for special rights to be accorded to the Macedonian minority in the south west of the country. But it could also seek further political connections with the partner party in Skopje. Many people regard Macedonian nationhood as fragile at best and further complicated by the rising number of Albanians in the country which could lead to the country's fragmentation.

VMRO's support for NATO's policies in the region could mean that countries like the US might welcome such fragmentation as part of its policies for reorganization of the region. Whether or not Bulgarians and Macedonians have anticipated such a solution is less clear.

Conclusion

Bulgaria is not the only country involved in the Kosovan war to have side-lined its representative structures in making far-reaching decisions that affect the country's sovereignty. At the moment it is perceived by the West as the 'good boy' of the Balkans for its help.

However, the NATO action could be a defining moment for modern Bulgaria as for other places in the region. Pressures on the state are likely to increase from the economically disadvantaged. Hopes for EU aid and a Marshall Plan are unlikely to be realised. Earlier this year Nicol Wegter, a spokesman for the EU Foreign Affairs Commissioner told prime minister Kostov that "none of the countries in the Balkans should expect any EU compensation if their trade routes are cut again by a renewed embargo on Yugoslavia". In another article respected commentator Paul Goble dismissed the likelihood of American aid for reconstruction in the region.

Tensions will be further exacerbated if new political formations like VMRO become more politically active in Bulgaria. The longer the conflict goes on in Yugoslavia the more Bulgaria's infant democracy and ailing economy will suffer.

In an interview with Reuters in February Mr. Kostov said that NATO airstrikes against Serbian forces in Kosovo would be a "nightmare" for Bulgaria. Despite his later compliance with such policies it could be that his original prognosis was the correct one.