

Macedonia: Referendum on Proposed re-districting of Local Government units

7th November 2004



Macedonia, the missing piece in the jigsaw of the European superstate. A poster on display in the weeks leading up to the referendum

Summary

On 7th November 2004, fewer than 30% of those eligible turned out to vote in Macedonia's referendum on local government re-organisation which required a minimum 50% participation. Hardly a subject to disturb the headline-writers, one might have thought. Yet Washington and Brussels worked overtime to achieve that level of apathy. The low turnout was hailed as a triumph for Euro-Atlantic values. Perhaps an invalid Balkan referendum on an obscure local issue tells us more about the New World Order than anyone might have expected.

Introduction

Changes in the rules regulating a country's local government rarely excite international interest but the exception must be Macedonia's proposed re-districting which was the subject of a referendum on 7th November, 2004. Because the issue was cast in terms of increasing the influence of ethnic Albanians at the expense of ethnic Macedonians the outcome attracted not only the attention of NATO and the EU but the direct intervention of their spokesmen in the campaign. Modern Macedonia is very much a creation of the West. From the break up of Yugoslavia in 1991 until today, the West has intervened there either directly through its military, diplomatic and economic agencies or indirectly through groups like the Open Society Institute of George Soros, who personally funded the Macedonian national debt a decade ago.

Already in the 1999 war against Milosevic's Yugoslavia Macedonia had served NATO as a key staging base and has continued to do so for the occupation of Kosovo since June, 1999. Macedonia provides the KFOR garrison with an R-n-R region. It houses many of the brothels, discos and other, largely Albanian-run entertainment facilities (with girls imported from poverty-stricken states like Moldova and Ukraine) which service the garrison of Kosovo and the many other international personnel based in the Balkans.¹

¹ For instance, the Council of Europe – no mean supplier of “internationals” to the region – estimates that “In Bosnia, it is estimated that internationals (such as police officers, peace-keepers and aid workers) account for about 37% of all brothel revenue. One thousand girls of 15 - 16 years are reported to be working in Macedonian brothels.” See http://www.coe.int/T/E/Com/Files/Ministerial-Conferences/2003-Equality/Women_and_war.asp

In March, 2001, Albanian terrorist groups, using the same initials UCK as the Kosovo Liberation Army, started an insurrection against the Macedonian state. Western intervention led to the Ohrid Agreement in June, 2001, which forced the Macedonian state to make concessions to the insurgents, who in turn set up a political party, the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI). The overlap between DUI and the militant organisations, UCK (National Liberation Army) and ANA (Albanian National Army) is widely acknowledged, as is the West's preference for the "cool" black leather-jacketed gun-toting representatives of the under-privileged but over-gunned Albanian minority.² Terrorism and mafia activities go hand in hand as does providing off-duty recreation for KFOR.

The Ohrid Agreement specified that if any ethnic minority (in practice Albanians) reached 20% of the population of any district then that would trigger an obligation on the local council to adopt bi-lingual procedures, signposts, etc. Since non-Albanian minorities rapidly disappear from districts in which Albanians have gained the upper hand, the Ohrid obligations are framed entirely in terms of Macedonian concessions. Ethnic Macedonians driven from their homes in 2001 remain destitute as internally-displaced members of the majority which must pay for minority rights including the right to expel. Neither the Macedonian government nor the much-vaunted international community show any inclination to waste resources on unarmed victims of the "peace process."

Ohrid like other tourist towns on the beautiful Lake Ohrid is a natural focus of recreation in Macedonia. However, unlike the notorious brothel townships Kundovo and Velešta,³ both Ohrid and Skopje are not under Albanian control. The town of Struga is roughly evenly split between Macedonians and Albanians (each hovering around 45% of the population) with the balance held by Macedonia's other minorities. The town's lakeside location makes it a classic target for a mafia takeover. It would make a very suitable Las Vegas of the Balkans if only local zoning laws and local inhabitants could be got out of the way.

Re-districting or partition?

Macedonia's current local government legislation dates back to 1996 when the president Branko Crvenkovski was prime minister of an SDSM-led government. Then, the main opposition party, VMRO-DPME, opposed the changes. Each big Macedonian party has reversed its position on local government and this, no doubt, contributes to cynicism among ordinary Macedonian citizens of all ethnicities.

The Ohrid Agreement and Euro-Atlantic integration are invariably cited as the main reason for changing the 1996 arrangements with subsidiary emphasis on the changes alleged benefits local people and local government finances and services.

Although re-districting had been an issue hovering in the background of post-Ohrid Macedonian politics it only really took off as an issue from early 2004. By mid-summer widespread protests and referendums in 41 localities (not all ethnically mixed) had expressed opposition to proposed changes. These were poorly understood. Backroom deals between Crvenkovski and Ahmeti of DUI were widely feared.

As early as 2nd July, RFE's Ulrich Buechsenschuetz noted that the talks between government and opposition had become "deadlocked." Partly this reflected a clash between the two main Macedonian parties, the ruling SDSM and the main opposition party, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (VMRO-DPMNE) but even "some legal experts complain that the talks on the redistricting plans lack transparency, warning that the decentralization efforts might fail altogether."

The basic scheme of reducing the 123 districts (Opštini) to around 60 – the government never

² See Timothy Garton Ash, "Is there a Good Terrorist?" in *New York Review of Books* 29th November, 2001, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/14860> where Ali Ahmeti's offer of a fifteen year-old Islay whisky to the author seems to render the question-mark superfluous.

³ See <http://k.mihalec.tripod.com/current/arizona.htm> and <http://www.geocities.com/humanperil/Kingpin2.html> for a map of Velešta's whorehouses.

clarified exactly how many places would be affected or when – was supposed to enhance local control over finance for health care and education, but little explanation was offered as to how this would happen, not least in a country under ever stricter budgetary regulation if it was to meet EU entry criteria.

Although local government minister, Alexander Gestakovski, said in February, 2004, that the government would take account of local referendums, after 40 of them had supported the proposals, the government under pressure from DUI and its Euro-Atlantic backers decided to ignore local expressions of opinion.⁴

RFE/RL's Buechsenschuetz noted that "Initially, the protests against the redistricting plans focused on legal, administrative, and financial issues rather than on the districts' ethnic composition." There were many reasons for revising or keeping the post-1996 boundaries which did not involve Macedonia's sensitive ethnic balance. A number of purely Macedonian districts objected to the plan even though it would not involve "diluting" their ethnic composition. Several non-Macedonian but also non-Albanian minority townships had also expressed doubts about the plans. But ethnicity increasingly reared its head as the central issue.

Buechsenschuetz's analysis was that the proposed reform was inciting the very inter-ethnic antagonisms that the implementation of the Ohrid Agreement was supposed to lay to rest:

"The shift from administrative, legal, or financial issues to ethnic and national issues in the talks about decentralization makes it more difficult to find a lasting solution, Gordana Siljanovska -- a law professor at Skopje University -- told RFE/RL's Macedonian broadcasters on 20 June. 'When you talk about things like language, names, [or] symbols, then you are talking about things charged with passion,' Siljanovska said, adding, 'It is difficult to reach any agreement about things that involve emotions.' But Siljanovska also complained that the talks among politicians on decentralization are taking place behind closed doors, thereby excluding the people who will be directly affected. For Siljanovska, such closed talks de-legitimize the government and the administrative reform as a whole."

Pushing through the changes without positive public support across the spectrum risked causing further trouble down the line, according to Buechsenschuetz: "Given the complexity of the reform and its importance for the future of Macedonia, any quick solution without public support and against the will of the citizens could become a Pyrrhic victory for the government."⁵

From 7th July, a number of small scale clashes between police and protestors took place across Macedonia from the capital, Skopje, to southern towns like Ohrid.

On 20th July, the ruling SDSM agreed with its partners the Albanian DUI and the LDP to implement the re-districting proposals. This decision was immediately endorsed by the ambassadors of the USA and EU countries who declared that Macedonia "has made another important step towards its European future."⁶ Two days later a key member of the SDSM government, defence minister, Vlado Buchkovski, witnessed for himself how high emotions could run on the issue.

On 22nd July, 2004, the lakeside town of Struga was the scene of unprecedented clashes between police and local people after a crowd of at least 600 gathered outside the local headquarters of the ruling SDSM party where defence minister Buchkovski, and the party's general-secretary, Nichola Kurciev, were present. The protestors were demanding that the government in Skopje abandon its re-districting plans. At about 9pm Mr Buchkovski gave a telephone interview to a local radio station in which he disparaged the demonstrators

⁴ See Buechsenschuetz, "END NOTE: MACEDONIAN DECENTRALIZATION TALKS DEADLOCKED", RFE/RL Research Report, 2nd July, 2004

⁵ See *ibid.*

⁶ See <http://see.oneworld.net/article/view/90284/1/>

besieging the SDSM headquarters. The mood turned even uglier and a petrol bomb was thrown at the building igniting a small fire.

Using rubber bullets and CS tear gas special police and para-military units attacked the crowd while the politicians were rescued by helicopter. The EU's Proxima police mission approved the Macedonian authorities' handling of the situation.⁷

On 24th October, three BHHRG observers had a long meeting with members of the Struga "crisis staff" in the town hall. A number of these mainly middle-aged and elderly people had evidence of injuries received at the hands of the security forces. Either they still bore the scars or they had photographs of themselves taken at the time. They also displayed the used casings of CS gas canisters and rubber bullets. The general view of this group was that the police had deliberately used excessive force, especially once Buchkovski and his team had been rescued and that this use of force against so many older people was intended to intimidate the local population. Their argument was that even if protecting the defence minister and his associates was the police's duty, the intensification of their attack on the protestors after the rescue mission was completed had a political not a policing purpose.

Why Re-districting is a big issue

Control over territory and particularly over valuable real-estate lies at the heart of the controversy. Voting rights are not the issue. Nor are language rights. Anyone familiar with the situation in Struga or observing the polls could see multi-lingual ballots and signs already in use. Although some local Macedonians expressed fears that the new districts would effectively re-create the boundaries of the "Greater Albania" established by Mussolini in 1941 when these parts of western Macedonia were incorporated into the Italian-ruled Kingdom of Albania, in practice more current concerns about the realities of a domination of Struga by neighbouring Albanian-mafia dominated communities in the hinterland were the main arguments against re-districting.

The shores of Lake Ohrid are relatively underdeveloped. By Soviet standards, Tito's Yugoslavia had a good record for protecting areas of outstanding natural interest and ecological value. Lake Ohrid with its natural beauty, unique trout population and fine reed beds combined with the wealth of ancient and especially medieval Orthodox Christian remains is a particularly vulnerable environment.

Anyone seeing the great swathes of Macedonia already consumed by the house-building frenzy among local Albanians fuelled by the endless supplies of cheap brick and mass-produced tiles from the EU must fear that any shift in the control of a town like Struga will see the collapse of building regulations and environmental controls already so evident in Albanian-controlled municipalities.

Kicevo will now include Ali Ahmeti's birthplace, Zajas. Anyone visiting Zajas and other ethnically purified villages will notice its high-walled compounds. These are not traditional. Newly-built and lavishly appointed houses can be seen behind the walls and blank gates which block ground level access and viewing. Macedonian houses and older Albanian houses and cottages are not as intimidating as these new constructions. The embattled minority certainly knows how to protect itself and to preserve its privacy. Politically correct apologies for these mini-fortresses will no doubt say that they reflect a Muslim concern for women's sanctity. Sadly, well-founded reports suggest that in some parts of Albanian-controlled Macedonia these strictly private buildings house brothels where sex slaves from impoverished East European states are held captive for the pleasure of well-paid "internationals" who are securing the "peace process" in the Balkans.

⁷ See, http://www.realitymacedonia.org.mk/web/news_page.asp?nid=3473

European Values versus Euro-Atlantic power structures

The intervention of the Euro-Atlantic power structures on the side of the SDSM and DUI was hardly surprising since NATO and the EU had acted as godfathers to the political alliance between the two parties eighteen months earlier. However, critics of the re-districting plan could call European values in support of their stance. After all, had not the constitutional expert, Robert Badinter, who had endorsed Macedonia's constitutional order as worthy of EU recognition thereby ratified the legitimacy of the referendum provisions contained in it. Why had the power-brokers in Brussels reneged on the constitutional order which had been worthy of independence from Yugoslavia then. Another problem was that as far back as 1985, the EU's then member states had adopted a Charter on Local Government which explicitly endorsed referendums as one way in which ordinary people could express their views on proposed changes to administration in their regions. For instance, the Charter states, "Local self-government... shall be exercised by councils or assemblies composed of members freely elected by secret ballot on the basis of direct, equal, universal suffrage, and which may possess executive organs responsible to them. This provision shall in no way affect recourse to assemblies of citizens, **referendums** or any other form of direct citizen participation where it is permitted by statute." [*emphasis added*]⁸

Oddly enough, the Council of Europe, which routinely intervenes in human rights and governance issues in member-states like Macedonia failed to assert the right to participate in referendums enshrined in its own charter! Its silence was a deafening taking of sides when other Euro-Atlantic institutions were trying to suppress participation.

Already before the referendum campaign got away the issue of external influence and even control over the Macedonian state's decision-making process had become controversial, even among normally pro-Western NGOs. On 12th July RFE/RL reported:

"HUMAN RIGHTS WATCHDOG WARNS THAT MACEDONIA MIGHT 'LOSE INDEPENDENCE.'

The Macedonian Helsinki Committee has warned in its latest report that Macedonia might "lose its independence" if the political elite continues to rely on foreign diplomats in the decision-making process, "*Utrinski vesnik*" reported on 12 July. According to the report, decisions are being made within a small circle of political oligarchs and with the help of foreign diplomatic representatives rather than in the democratically elected institutions. The committee called on politicians to return the decision-making process to the parliament and the other state institutions and to end the "unprecedented direct involvement of diplomatic representatives of foreign countries in the adoption of national legislation and implementation of laws."

NATO and EU officials from famous faces like Donald Rumsfeld to the New World Order's lowliest bag-carriers chimed in demanding Macedonians did not exercise their franchise, even to vote against the referendum proposal! Passing through Skopje from Iraq, where he was promoting democracy in his inimitable way, the US Defence Secretary told Macedonians on 11th October that they faced a "clear choice" and that rejecting the referendum "certainly helps strengthen democracy here at the grass root level!"⁹

As Christopher Deliso suggested Mr Rumsfeld's encouragement to Macedonians to make the right choice held a scarcely veiled threat: "either [vote for] '...a future with NATO, in which stability and economic growth can flourish, or a return to the past.'" In other words, 'stick with the plan, or we'll find a new war for you.'¹⁰

NATO's Italian deputy secretary-general, Alessandro Minuto Rizzo, chose Bulgaria's capital, Sofia, to warn neighbouring Macedonians, -"The decentralisation is a cornerstone of the

⁸ See Article 3, I-ii @ <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/en/Treaties/Html/122.htm>

⁹ AFP @ <http://www.keepmedia.com/ShowItemDetails.do?itemID=601799&extID=10030&oliID=226>

¹⁰ See Christopher Deliso, "Referendum Drive Begins Amidst Veiled Threats" @ <http://balkananalysis.com/modules.php?name=News&file=categories&op=newindex&catid=1>

Ohrid accord and an essential element to ensure the integration of the former Yugoslav republic of Macedonia into Euro-Atlantic institutions."

Rizzo was backed up by the British Minister for Europe Denis MacShane who called on Macedonians to boycott the vote, saying an expected 'No' vote would be anti-Europe even though on the same trip to the Balkans he had condemned Kosovo's Serbs for ---- boycotting the province's parliamentary elections on 23rd October!¹¹

Even by recent standards of foreign intervention in the Balkans, the Macedonian referendum campaign was distinguished by the level and intensity of Western interference. Diplomats from EU and NATO embassies were engaged in open campaigning for a boycott of the vote. This taking of sides by signatories of the Vienna Convention was unprecedented in its scale and had consequences for the election observation effort. The key OSCE coordinator, Gerald Mitchell, admitted in conversation with an observer from this Group that he had had difficulty in mobilising enough observers for the OSCE mission because so many diplomats from EU and NATO countries had disqualified themselves by making published or broadcast statements taking the government's side in the referendum campaign!

The EU's Special Representative in Skopje, Michael Sahlin, wrote on the EU/NATO government-funded Institute of War and Peace Reporting's website on 1st October, 2004, expressing the impatience of Brussels that a small Balkan country should presume to ask its citizens what was in their best interests. In the Orwellian Newspeak that comes so naturally to Eurocrats, Mr Sahlin blamed Macedonia's decay and implosion after it loyally followed every nostrum emanating from Brussels on the long-suffering Macedonians: "It is clear the 1990s were not effectively used to make Macedonia a real security provider. Reforms of the economy and judiciary – to mention a few important areas – were unfortunately not implemented. And, in many ways, Macedonia slowly declined. In 1996, with the creation of 124 small, unsustainable and powerless municipalities, it became one of Europe's most centralised states. The constitutional rights of minorities declined compared with the old Yugoslav constitution. And privatisation, rather than bringing new investments, stripped the state of its assets. In 2001, Macedonia's positive image really cracked. It became obvious to everyone that the country's ethnic problems had not been solved, but had merely been kept under a lid and had been fuelled by the general decline of the country." It was not Macedonia's interests but the West's which were uppermost in his mind: "the referendum, if successful, may result in a serious setback for Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic ambitions. All capitals in the Euro-Atlantic area will have to wonder whether Macedonia can and will move towards modernity and Europeanisation."¹²

Leaving aside the lower reaches of Big Brother-speak, whereby reducing 124 municipalities to 60 would decrease the country's centralisation, Sahlin's central point is that "Implemented decentralisation, including municipal reorganisation, is a necessary ingredient for EU and NATO accession." Although he insists that the EU and NATO back Macedonia's territorial integrity and oppose a Greater Albania, since the whole manner of his discourse is so suffused with Newspeak Macedonians may be forgiven for presuming Brussels-man speak with forked-tongue. Maybe no single Greater Albanian state is on the cards, but then Euro-Atlantic structures don't promote state sovereignty but shared sovereignty. What seems to be on the cards is a decentralisation of Macedonia which will further facilitate mafia domination of key localities and transit routes. Statehood is rarely the ambition of pirates. Plunder and protection money are their preferred game.

¹¹ [As reported by Agence France Presse (29th October, 2004)]

¹² See http://www.iwpr.net/index.pl?archive/bcr3/bcr3_200410_518_7_eng.txt

What's in a name?

Like so many other post-Communist societies, Macedonia is an "other-directed" statelet. Lacking self-confidence, suffering economic implosion and with a political class which sees foreign sponsorship as the substitute for patriotic statesmanship, Skopje has craved approval. At every stage when foreign powers have abused the trust and other services displayed towards them by Macedonians, the ruling elite has demanded more humiliation and self-abasement. This cringe-making procedure reached its climax on 6th November. President George W. Bush's spokesman had just announced Washington's intention of changing the United States' designation of the country from "the Former Yugoslav republic of Macedonia" (FYROM) henceforth to Macedonia. President Cvernkovski's government immediately staged a media blitz declaring the equivalent of "mission accomplished" climaxing with a concert in central Skopje to say "thank you" to President Bush and other named US statesmen, including Ambassador Butler. All the elements of post-modern bogus statehood were on hand, black leather jacketed heavies guarded the President and his ministers even from other dignitaries on the podium while Euro-Atlantic rock music alternated with Communist-era folk dancing to simulate the unanimous joy of a people who had discovered the world's only superpower knew who they were at last.

The Prague-based web-site Transitions online (ToL) reported, "On 4 November, the United States officially announced that it will recognize Macedonia's constitutional name, the Republic of Macedonia. The announcement, which many analysts will be tempted to describe as historic, triggered street celebrations in Skopje." ToL frequently reflects the thinking of US diplomats and intelligence circles commented, "Whatever else they might crave, Macedonians have first and foremost been hungry for recognition, starting with recognition of their right to be and call themselves as they wish. That hunger was last week on its way to being satisfied, as Macedonians felt they had suddenly gained what these days counts as being close to the ultimate recognition.

Washington's move told Macedonians explicitly that the United States accepts their state as permanent. It also implied that the fears promoted by the SMK and the rightwing opposition were unfounded. In other words, ethnic Macedonians were to understand the message as saying that, yes, Washington supports greater rights for Macedonia's Albanians, but it sees Macedonia as a single state; and to make that reassuring point, the Americans are even ready to annoy a NATO ally, Greece."

Transitions – online insisted that it "made... good sense to keep the inevitable recognition of Macedonia's constitutional name as a trump card to be played at a turning point. If this was indeed the case, that would suggest that the picture of the Bush administration as lacking interest in the region has been incorrect. What's more, it may have showed that the State Department is capable of strategic thinking in the Balkans." But Transitions-online was prepared to share the glory for Macedonians' apathy on 7th November, adding "Along with the United States' power to change the political mood, the failure of the referendum also demonstrated the magnetic power of the European Union in the Balkans."¹³

After the United States decision to recognise Macedonia by its name, the local Soros operation plastered the press and the country's walls and billboards with posters proclaiming "Goodbye FYROM, good morning Europe." Earlier Soros's Open Society had used slogans in a widespread advertising campaign with the sinister one-line, "There are some questions you shouldn't answer."¹⁴

On the morning of the referendum, the government extended bar opening times to 6a.m. ostensibly to celebrate the U.S. State Department's decision to use the name "Macedonia" for Macedonia in its official documents.¹⁵ Whether many Macedonians drank themselves

¹³ See Transitions-online's Our Take, "Macedonia: When the Best Choice is Not Choosing" (8 November 2004) @ <http://www.tol.cz/> which quotes the Soros Foundation's local slogan.

¹⁴ For the poster, see <http://www.soros.org.mk/default.asp?lang=eng&menuid=10>

¹⁵ November was Macedonia's "Fight Against Alcoholism Month"! See <http://www.mia.com.mk/>

insensible into the early hours of Sunday morning by downing too many toasts to George W. Bush or took the opportunity to drown their sorrows in an unemployment ravaged land is unclear. Yet a government which clearly preferred drunks to sober citizens is apparently one endorsed in Washington and Brussels as a preferred partner in NATO and the EU. Macedonia is also, of course, a major trans-shipment centre for heroin from the Middle East to Western Europe but that status too worries none of those Western politicians and diplomats who hurried to bask in the reflected glory of Macedonians' Euro-Atlantic apathy.

At the same time, Macedonia's Albanian parties were unanimous in supporting a petition drive – just not one for their own country. The unanimity with which Macedonia's Albanian political elite backed the demand for "Independence for Kosovo Now!" by the US-based American-Albanian Civic League suggested how far the Albanians of Macedonia and Kosovo form a single politico-military (and business) entity. US State Department claims that it won't recognise any change to Macedonia's borders could be challenged if Kosovo's final status is independence and the Albanians on both sides of the Kosovo-Macedonian border decide to challenge its continued existence. More likely, however, is that the smuggling groups who dominate the region will simply ignore the border more ostentatiously than they do now. With de-centralisation in Macedonia and "final status" in Kosovo offering countless chances for legal and policing limbo clear-cut solutions are the last things that the mafia groups who steer so much of politics in the region want to deal with. Clarity complicates their sort of business.

The Campaign

Leaving aside the foreign interventions and foreign-inspired events like the government-sponsored rally to thank the USA for recognising Macedonia's name on the eve of poll, there was very little campaigning in Macedonia before 7th November.

Compared with presidential and parliamentary election campaigns in recent years in Macedonia (which BHHRG has observed since 1998), the domestically-generated referendum was very low key. The government put up a few posters showing Macedonia as the missing piece of a European jigsaw puzzle, implying that a "yes" vote would leave the country as a black hole, but otherwise confined itself to making crude hints to state employees that they should not risk their jobs in a time of economic downturn by going to the polls. The suggestion that a pro-Euro-Atlantic stance would guarantee prosperity was obviously geared to remind individual voters that their own prosperity and job security might well depend on the referendum's turnout. Apart from a few self-contradictory statements by the DPA's Arben Xhaferi – once the West's favourite Albanian politician but since trumped by the "good terrorist" Mr. Ahmeti – Albanian politicians made clear their insistence on a boycott.

A variety of ethnic Macedonian-based parties and groups including the World Union of Macedonians which initiated the referendum petition advocated participation and a "yes" vote. But the public profile of their campaign(s) in terms of posters and adverts was much lower than in earlier elections.

The VMRO-DPME argument that most citizens of Macedonia did not trust the current government and rejected its optimistic assertions about the benefits of the new re-districting should not cause outsiders to overlook the role of the VMRO-DPME government in the previous parliament (1998-2002) in demoralising ordinary people by accepting both the Ohrid Agreement but also the structural economic reforms which have promoted penury and criminality in society.¹⁶ The state of Macedonia's economy is best assessed from considering the *langue de bois* used to describe it by Prime Minister, Hari Kostov in an interview with the *South-East European Times* on 18th October, 2004, comments in which planning and privatisation coexist as if compatible: "The planned industrial growth and revival of production have not been achieved at the expected pace because of the incomplete sale and failed

ang/Vest.asp?vest=1\FIGHT%20AGAINST%20ALCOHOLISM%20MONTH.htm

¹⁶ For the VMRO-DPME leader, Nikola Gruevski's well-argued reply to the EU's Sahlin published on 6th October, 2004, see http://realitymacedonia.org.mk/web/news_page.asp?nid=3734 bujt note his lack of mea culpa in explaining how Macedonia has sunk to its present plight.

restart of the so-called 'loser' enterprises (above all, the mines and smelter in Veles) and bankrupt enterprises. The physical scope of industrial production declined by 10 per cent, expected investments did not materialise, and a number of business partners were lost in 2001. As a result of improved economic ambience, industrial production recorded a 3.5 per cent increase in 2003. This year, Macedonia is recording again a decline in industrial production because of inactive significant capacities which are in the sales phase."¹⁷

In many countries with poor economic performance a referendum in mid-term would be the natural occasion for voters to turn out to give the government in office a drubbing, but Macedonia is not a normal country.

The local print media entered into the debate of the issues more enthusiastically, but that called down thunderbolts from the gods of in the heaven of media correctness. Perversely enough, given the scale of the Euro-Atlantic intervention in the campaign the *New York Times* chose to run a long article attacking foreign intervention in Macedonian politics – by Macedonian journalists working for foreign-owned media. Apparently, the German owners of several Macedonian newspapers should have acted to prevent the publication of articles and opinion pieces favouring participation in the referendum! The Orwellian argument was put forward by Vladimir Milcin, head of the Soros-funded Open Society Institute in Skopje who denounced the German newspaper group, WAZ, which owns the biggest-selling *Dnevnik* declaring, "WAZ is playing with fire. Its newspapers are blatantly anti-EU and US, even accusing both of interfering in the internal affairs of Macedonia!"¹⁸ Big Brother couldn't have put it better himself: foreign owners respecting the right of local authors to express an opinion equals interference; foreign paymaster whipping in locals equals freedom of opinion.

Election Day:

From early on polling day it seemed clear that turnout would be low. Even in Struga, the centre of the political storm for the previous six months, voters were not going to the polls even among the roughly half of the population which was expected to be sympathetic to the referendum. Even though the Central Election Commission would be broadcasting running turnout figures from localities during the day the anti-boycotters seemed to have put no effort into turning out their vote early to give themselves some momentum. Instead they relied on electoral folk-wisdom: "Our people vote after lunch." The weather wasn't good at the start of the day and heavy rain set in for the rest of it.

By 10am at Struga's station no.1844 only about 10% of the 831 registered voter had voted. More than 50% of the locals had voted in the second round of the presidential elections held after the death of President Trajkovski in February, 2004. The electoral commission which included a DUJ representative said that only about 50 ethnic Albanians were registered to vote at the polling station. None of the multi-party commission members nor the observers had any complaints then, or later in the day when the BHHRG returned. A similar pattern of slow voting was seen elsewhere in Struga in the morning, for instance at No. 1845 where 128 of the 904 registered voters had turned out by 10am. The only oddity was that the local observer from the MOST ("Bridge") refused to talk to the Group's observers saying she had been instructed only to answer questions from the OSCE.

In mid-morning the observers visited the primary school in Struga housing polling stations 1854 and 1855. Judging from the decorations on the classroom walls the pupils were Albanian since all the writing on these exhibits and on the blackboard was in Albanian, but the

¹⁷ See Marija Lazarova, "Hari kostov: decentralisation a Step toward stronger Democracy and Euro-Atlantic Integration" in the *South-East European Times* @ http://www.setimes.com/cocoon/setimes/xhtml/en_GB/features/setimes/articles/2004/10/18/reportage-01

¹⁸ See Judy Dempsey, "Foreign Ownership a sore point in East Europe's media" in *The International Herald Tribune* edition of *The New York Times* (8th November, 2004), 12. It would be nice to think that the editorial staff's statement to the BHHRG's observers that they hadn't heard about the New York thunderer's attack on them reflected Balkan insouciance rather than parochial ignorance of who was aiming at their jugular.

EC members said the district was multi-ethnic. Only 100 of the 950 registered voters at 1854 had appeared at the polls. Again, there was some suggestion that more would come in the afternoon. As it happens, this particular polling station was to be the focus of a controversial incident in the late afternoon, whose consequences the Group's observers discovered when they returned unannounced for the count before 7pm that evening.

In Labunište, north-west of Struga, the Group's observers found polling stations undisturbed by voters. Their ballot boxes had received no visitors. Until 1996, the town had been part of Struga municipality. Since then it had obviously flourished at least in the sense that new buildings were eating up farmland around the town and empty lots inside it. It had a mixed population which was overwhelmingly Muslim but divided between Albanians and other Muslim minorities (Slav Muslims and Turks in particular). At the start of 2004, the local authority had organised a referendum on the issue of Labunište's proposed re-incorporation into Struga. According to local election officials 98% of the local people who had voted then rejected the idea. Yet on 7th November, not one voter seemed of the same mind as 11 months earlier!

When one Muslim chairman of a polling station was asked to account for the dramatic shift from unanimity (as expressed by voters) against the re-districting plan to an even greater unanimity in boycotting the current referendum and therefore endorsing the plan, he merely smiled and suggested, "We live in the Balkans. Between January and November the weather changed." What this gnomic comment was meant to convey is not certain since he refused clarification, but an atmosphere of menace hung over the town. Was there intimidation at work to promote a boycott? Had local non-Albanians drawn the obvious conclusion that no-one would protect them if they defied the expressed wishes of both NATO-EU and the local power-brokers for a boycott and therefore that apathy was the better part of civic activity?

Other local commission members suggested that Ramadan was still in force and therefore people were unhappy about voting during the Muslims' season of fasting. However, since local food shops were open with stocks of fresh fruit and vegetables, bread, etc. on display and some local people were eating and drinking in the street, strict Islamic observance could not be the explanation of the unanimous boycott.

The observers visited Velešta near Struga. There were 662 voters registered at polling station 1914 in this 100% Albanian village. Not one of them had turned out to vote, though a commission of DUI and DPA (Democratic Party of Albanians) plus an observer from Most were present. Like its neighbouring station 1913 (854 registered, no votes by lunchtime), 1914 was housed in the building of the Velešta Business Center, sponsored by USAID. At a nearby school, station 1915, none of the 884 voters had come to cast a ballot.

Although in each polling station in Velešta there was a commission each consisted only of members of DUI and DPA, whereas in Struga and other mixed places DUI was represented alongside "Macedonian" parties in the election commissions of the polling stations. Also in Velešta, none of the polling stations had the official posters outside them which advised citizens of the buildings' special purpose on 7th November.

In polling station, 1914, the commission members said that Velešta was too small a municipality to survive on its own, because it has no factory or industry. When the observers pointed out how many new houses there were, they were told that all the new houses in the village were financed by money sent home from abroad. Most people, in fact, live abroad, according to the commission members.

All seemed calm and normal on the surface, but Velešta is "a town synonymous with forced prostitution that police which experts consider to be one of the most dangerous places in Europe" according to MSNBC's Preston Mendenhall.¹⁹ What really holds sway over the

¹⁹ See his "Sex Slaves: Europe's trade in Drugs, Guns and Women" @ http://www.humantrafficking.com/humantrafficking/features_ht3/MSNBC_Sex_Slaves/MSNBC_1.htm

inhabitants may not be solidarity so much as fear, but if it is fear, it is a terror backed by the most powerful military-political alliance in world history, NATO.

In other Albanian-inhabited villages in the greater Struga region, the observers found a similar level of total abstention. Even in Albanian villages it seems odd from a civic society perspective that not one “awkward customer” should exist who had turned out to vote, even if only “no.” In the past, BHHRG observers have witnessed huge turnouts in the Albanian villages situated on the fringe of western Macedonia. All-or-nothing seems to be the approach to voting among this community, but that very fact makes any talk of Macedonia as a “civic society” or one securely on the path of the Euro-Atlantic model absurd, if not downright sinister. Is this model of ethnic blocks voting or abstaining like robots really what the future holds for Europe?

In Kicevo No. 1744, one observer (not from Most) ventured to suggest that the EU and US interventions in the campaign had discouraged about 20% of voters from turning out, but the station did not look likely to reach 50% even if they had come, in part because it was in a 60% Albanian neighbourhood.

In Ohrid turnout was as low as the weather vane. Driving rain may have discouraged some voters but the performance at Ohrid No.1275 – 196 voters from 854 registered by 5pm – was typical.

Turnout seemed to improve in some specifically Macedonian parts of Struga municipality late in the day. By 6.30pm, Struga No.1845 had seen 736 of its 904 voters come to the polls according to the commission there. At 1844, 567 voted out of a possible 831 shortly before the close of the polls. But these turnouts were exceptional. In general, even in Macedonian parts of the affected regions, the government and EU/NATO message had got through or at least people acted as if they were abiding by it whatever the majority’s motives for staying away from the polls.

The Count:

BHHRG observers are used to flawed polls in Macedonia but the referendum on 7th November, 2004, produced one of the more bizarre incidents in the Group’s observing career.

Shortly before 7pm, in order to observe a count the Group’s observers returned to a polling station in Struga (No. 1854) which they had visited in the morning. On arrival they were told that a serious incident had taken place there about two hours earlier.

Just before 5pm according to the commission chairman and secretary a group of 15 to 20 young men had stormed into the polling station. While some of them prevented anyone else entering the building – including the OSCE’s observer Suzanna Duda who arrived at the same time as the incident began – the rest seized control of the ballots and voters’ list in station 1854 and began to fill out votes and to add signatures to the list. Tiring of the effort involved in signing up against the names of Albanians who had boycotted the poll, the gang then stuffed hundreds of ballot papers marked “yes” into the box, though they also threw in a few – 7 were on the floor - marked both “yes” and “no”, including a handful which were marked in both languages!

After the gang had gone, according to the commission members and the OSCE observer, a representative of the regional election commission based a few hundred yards away on the Struga lakefront arrived and told the commission to continue with the poll and to count the results after devising an unspecified way of distinguishing between valid and invalid votes!

The gang had apparently tried to enter the next door classroom in the school which housed another polling station but was prevented by its more robust commission members from getting through the door.

The incident was bizarre in many ways, not least in the way it was handled by the higher authorities. Clearly, it would be impossible to distinguish between votes cast before 5pm by honest voters and those cast by equally honest voters after the incident – and occasional voters came into the station up to the close of the poll.

The assumption seemed to be that any voter must be breaking the EU-NATO-SDSM-DUI boycott deliberately and therefore voting “yes.” In fact a small number of voters did appear to vote “No” in person so even that presumption was flawed. In any case a forcible interruption of voting and interference with the ballot box should have closed the polling station affected. The regional electoral commission might have considered some way of letting voters cast their ballots again. All of them lived in housing blocks very close to the polling station so it did not require voters to make a long or difficult journey to come back and vote again.

In practice, letting the voting continue caused the commission in 1854 major headaches when it came to the count. A theatre of the absurd ensued for two hours after the close of the poll at 7pm as the commission members struggled to reconcile the irreconcilable: how many real voters had come, how many legitimate ballots had been cast and how many false ballots had been stuffed into the box by the intruders, particularly as they seem to have brought some ballots of their own, though from an officially produced batch!

The method of counting was also flawed by an apparent desire to diminish the “yes” vote: the commission members invalidated ballots when a voter had ringed the word for “yes” in both Macedonian and Albanian (“za” and “per”). When voters had clearly indicated the word “za” in the question though not in the appropriate box, this apparently clear expression of the voter’s intention was also discarded as invalid. Invalid voters were deducted from the turnout – a vital part of the exercise – though later some seem to have been put back in to the station’s total if only to help iron out the contradictory figures produced by varying assessments of how many ballots had been dumped in the box by the intruders versus the number of names signed for by them.

Early in the count a figure for the number of real voters before and after the incident was arrived at: 355 voted before 4.55pm and 66 after the intruders left, leaving a total of 421 valid votes. But which anonymous ballots were real. The decision seems to have been arrived at that “no” votes were genuine and so were a sufficient number of spoiled ballots to make the figures add up! However, subsequent scrutiny produced another “Final Result”:

389 valid ballots
363 yes
18 no
8 invalid
(77 “yes” votes were rejected by the EC as the result of ballot stuffing.)

950 people were registered to vote at Struga 1854 so barely 40% were recorded as having voted for what it was worth. Even with the invalid fraudulent ballots (as determined in an anarchic way by the electoral commission) the turnout would have fallen below 50%. (Next door at 1055, fewer than 50% of the 1030 registered voters had cast ballots.)

Whatever the level of intimidation in Struga 1854 it was far lower than what many Western journalists witnessed in Kondovo near Skopje. Nicholas Wood reported in *The New York Times*, “On the eve of the election, armed ethnic Albanian gunmen could be seen in Kondovo, a village on the outskirts of Skopje. Men wearing green camouflage uniforms and carrying Kalashnikov rifles were patrolling in a village. When asked why they were there, one replied, “Wait until the 8th, and you’ll see what will happen.”²⁰

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<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/11/07/international/europe/07macedonia.html?position=&ei=5070&en=4ac0abdd1eb4d28f&ex=1100667600&adxnnl=1&pagewanted=all&adxnnlx=1100545026-qC7WK9wBBGO4bimHCST0DQ>

Doubts have been cast about whether as many as the official number of 1,709,536 voters registered in the voters' list actually live in Macedonia. Everyone agrees that many Albanian men live and work abroad – that after all is the official explanation of the funding of the western region's housing boom – but the CEC's figure of only 454,247 or 26,59 percent casting their votes may be, as Macedonia's Supreme Court has ruled, "considered as final."²¹

Conclusion: Sigh of Relief or Democracy's Last Gasp?

The New World Order's loyal chorus let out a sigh of relief.²² On the day after the vote, *Reuters* declared, "Macedonia was a rung higher on the ladder to EU and NATO... Nudged by Washington and cajoled by Brussels, most Macedonians stayed away from the polls on a rainy Sunday, dooming what the West had viewed as a retrograde step."²³ The result of the referendum confirmed the tribal totalitarianism of the Albanian community in Macedonia. Whereas the ethnic Macedonian population was divided roughly in to two halves, one voting the other boycotting, the Albanians of Macedonia acted as one conformist bloc. Civil society with its pluralism and inherent splits across ethnic and religious lines seems as far away from Macedonia's Albanians as ever. It was only in Albanian-controlled villages like Kundovo that armed men appeared on the streets to enforce the boycott and offer a picture of what Albanian-controlled municipalities are like. Yet the archetypical "open societies" of the West applauded the lock-step mentality of Macedonia's Albanians as a key factor in determining the country's suitability for Euro-Atlantic integration!

Macedonia's civic society died when an alien-ordered boycott determined the outcome of a constitutionally valid referendum. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the issue on the ballot paper, in any normal democracy it would have been defeated by voters expressing their views in the ballot booth, not by pressure to toe a public line by demonstrably not going to the polls. The secret ballot protects the rights of all citizens. Demands by the powerful that citizens stay away from the polls are an order to the little man and women to make their preference public. It is a disgrace that ministers from NATO and the EU's supposed model democracies backed the suppression of the secret ballot in favour of public demonstrations of fealty.

The fact that a key campaigner for the boycott, Prime Minister, Hari Kostov, resigned only one week later saying that economic reform was thwarted by the "corruption and nepotism" of one of his coalition partners – universally read as DUI – shows how irrelevant to any real improvement in conditions for ordinary people the re-districting issue is.²⁴

Both NATO and EU enlargement are more and more including corrupt, mafia-ridden bogus democracies into their midst. The post-Cold War security architecture of Europe resembles a protection racket rather than a community of democratic societies. The new mafia's media loyalists shout down any dissent and down out alternative information about the reality of the process under way in the Balkans. Soon enough Old Europe will realize what kind of states are sitting at the high table in Brussels with it, determining our common fate.

²¹ See <http://www.mia.com.mk/ang/glavnavest/lastvest.asp?vest=\Refresh1\180-1611.htm>

²² For ToL's predictable response, see *Biljana Stavrova and Robert Alagjovovski*, "[Macedonia: A Sigh of Relief: Plans for increased local autonomy are on track after a referendum fails](http://www.tol.cz/look/TOL/section.tpl?IdLanguage=1&IdPublication=4&NrIssue=75&NrSection=1)" @ <http://www.tol.cz/look/TOL/section.tpl?IdLanguage=1&IdPublication=4&NrIssue=75&NrSection=1>

²³ Quoted at <http://www.balkanpeace.org/hed/archive/nov04/hed6783.shtml>

²⁴ For Kostov's resignation, see <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/4013467.stm>