

Macedonia: Mission to Peace



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Peace Counts *project*



For a long time, Macedonia was seen as a model for a successful “multicultural” society. The Macedonian-Christian and Albanian-Muslim ethnic groups lived together relatively peacefully for many years. Nevertheless in 2001, the smoldering conflict in Kosovo spread over the border and resulted in heavy fighting between the army and the Albanian UCK rebels.



Majorities and Minorities: In Macedonia, the largest minority group is the Albanians, who make up around 20 percent of the population. Other minority groups include the Roma, Serbs, Turks and other smaller groups. The majority of the population are Slavic Macedonians and orthodox Christians. Most of the Albanians, on the other hand, are Muslims.



Through a referendum process, Macedonia attained its status as an independent republic in 1991. Ten years later, the violence escalated in this country, which was relatively stable up to that point. After the country absorbed another group of refugees from Kosovo in 1999, Albanian extremists started to provoke the Macedonian army. In the area near the border with Kosovo, the UCK attacked police posts and tried to bring the conflict to the heart of the country.



When followers of the extremist Albanian “National Liberation Army” praise their heroes, the conflict starts to simmer. Different paramilitary groups, including almost 2,000 mostly young soldiers, wanted to use bombs in order to unify the Albanian settlements in the Balkans. In Macedonia, the armed conflict lasted almost seven months.



In the first half of 2001, many people were forced to flee because of the fighting. From January until the end of June, about 100,000 people left their villages and cities, according to statistics from the UNHCR, the UN refugee organization. Out of these, 65,000 fled to Kosovo and 6,000 to southern Serbia. About 100 people were killed in the bloody conflict.



Funerals became political events. Local and regional media were frequently present and sometimes they added fuel to the fire. The mourners mixed their grief with hate and mistrust of the other side. They asked the international community how the conflict could be deescalated and how they could rebuild trust in their society.



The EU, NATO and the USA in particular tried to negotiate during the conflict, and they successfully created the "Peace Treaty of Ohrid." A 3,500 man NATO team would oversee the disarmament of the UCK, as agreed to in the treaty. After the treaty was successfully finalized, NATO carried out the operation "Task Force Fox," on the Macedonian government's request. The NATO mission, which has been operating since September 2001, includes 600 German soldiers. The NATO soldiers' mission is to protect the international civilian monitors sent by the OSCE and the EU. Nevertheless, everyone knows that disarmament is one thing, but building peace is quite another.



The peace process remains overshadowed by violence even after the cease-fire. Destroyed buildings are the only visible sign of destruction from the war. Nevertheless there is still very little trust between the groups. Many tasks remain for the international civilian team, and great hopes rest on their work.



The OSCE has been in Macedonia with a small team to monitor the border since 1992. In September 2001, the OSCE increased its mission from around 15 personnel to around 400. Elena Gulmadova was among the new recruits for this difficult work. She is a “confidence building officer” for the “OSCE Spillover Monitor Mission to Skopje,” a mission to peace.



Elena is from Tajikistan. After her university education as a gynecologist, she decided to turn her life around. She attended many courses in diplomacy and applied to the OSCE. She was hired and first went to Bosnia and then to Macedonia. The city of Kumanovo is her base and is around 50 kilometers northeast from the capital Skopje. Even at the end of 2001, there were still bomb attacks in Kumanovo.



Training the police is one of the main tasks of the OSCE mission. They first hope to increase the numbers of ethnic minorities, for example Albanians and Roma, and the numbers of women in the police force. When the police finally return to disputed crisis regions, it will be the deciding factor needed to fill the current power vacuum.



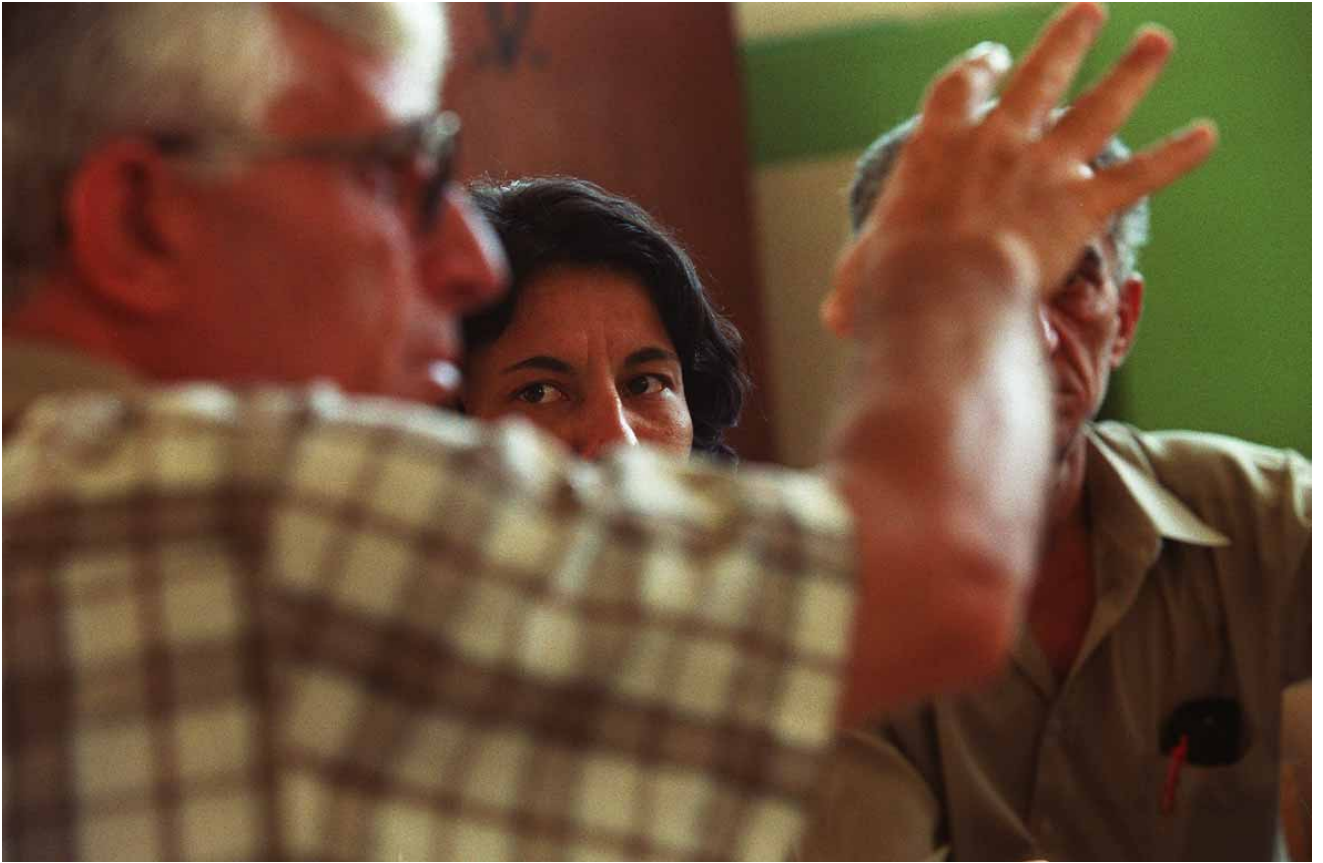
Even after the official disarmament of the UCK, the private possession of guns in Macedonia is still a huge problem. It is estimated that there are more than 450,000 small arms in the country. For this reason, it almost seems impossible to implement a state monopoly on the use of force.



Elena has to speak with all sides of the conflict. In March 2002, an amnesty was adopted, which pardoned the former soldiers of the UCK. Nevertheless, war criminals were not granted amnesty. The amnesty is also a topic Elena discusses with members of the Macedonian army.



“Conversations with people in the field” belongs to one of the confidence-building measures of the OSCE. These discussions are necessary in order “to reestablish a working relationship with the government.” It sounds convincing and plausible. Nevertheless, for Elena this means she must be assertive in a patriarchal society if she wants to be accepted.



The Tajik listens and knows that any false word could mean the end of the new conversation. Many topics are very controversial: how generous should the amnesty for criminals be? What can be done to reintegrate the soldiers? How should the refugees return home? Who will help rebuild the houses?



This is how to win friends and allies. Before the war, the OSCE had a relatively good reputation among the people. After the violence escalated, however, both sides blamed the representatives of the international community for being partial to the other side. Elena has a difficult time dealing with the topic of the necessary “neutrality.”



Fostering cooperation between the civilian forces from the EU and the different NGOs on the ground is absolutely necessary for successful work in the crisis region. Talking, listening, convincing others, and learning as a result, all belong to the everyday tasks of a “confidence building officer.”



In very practical work, success is sometimes only measurable in small steps. The cautious preparation for the return of the refugees is such a task. "In many small villages in the mountainous areas along the border, people are no longer harmoniously living together. Nevertheless people are living together again, and this is the first step."



Are you fed up with taking baby steps? "You have to be convinced of your work. Otherwise, it does not make any sense," said Elena. "Without belief in your work, you cannot convince anyone to believe in themselves and to find a new direction in life."



When things return to normal and people start living together again, the work of the civilian monitors will be finished. "It is our goal to make ourselves superfluous." However the OSCE is still far from reaching this goal.



Where does Elena get her peace of mind for doing her work? When others are on the brink of a nervous breakdown, she seems to be completely calm. "As a gynecologist I learned to always stay calm and even-tempered. Maybe this experience has helped me with my work here in Macedonia."