

**The Calm Before the Storm?
The Influence of Cross-Border Networks, Corruption,
and Contraband on Macedonian Stability and Regional Security**

by
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Abstract

This paper explores the multidimensional problem of organized crime in Macedonia and its relationship to the current conflict between the Macedonian state and the Albanian-led National Liberation Army (NLA). I argue that crime and corruption play a central role in explaining why Macedonia has found itself at a virtual state of war for the past six months. Criminal networks within the Albanian community are key elements in the organization and maintenance of Albanian paramilitary forces. A powerful Albanian syndicate emerged in the 1990s. It controls a substantial part of the heroin, prostitution, cigarette, and human trafficking rings that serve Western Europe. Nascent Albanian radical groups were able to capitalize on the networks and support of the Albanian mafia. This enabled them to gather the requisite weaponry to spread war in the southern Balkans. Organized crime within the Albanian community, however, covers only half of the problem. The Macedonian state is a thoroughly corrupt set of institutions that has stymied democratic development, alienated average citizens, and de-legitimized (especially among Albanians) the possibility and desirability of an ethnically-neutral, citizen-based, liberal state. Together, these twin forces, Albanian social-criminality and Macedonian state-corruption, have moved in tandem, maintaining a democratic facade for Macedonia while the interior of the system has decayed. This paper contributes to the literature on ethnic politics by emphasizing two points: (1) system-wide corruption creates weak states that are vulnerable to external aggression; and (2) the availability of weapons is the single most important determinant of ethnic war.

“Every country has a mafia. Only, in Macedonia, the mafia has a country.”

I. Introduction

This paper explores the multidimensional problem of organized crime in Macedonia and its relationship to the current conflict between the Macedonian state and the Albanian-led National Liberation Army (NLA). I argue that crime and corruption play a central role in explaining why Macedonia has found itself at a virtual state of war for the past six months. Criminal networks within the Albanian community are key elements in the organization and maintenance of Albanian paramilitary forces. My plan is to document these connections and explore their roots. Organized crime within the Albanian community, however, covers only half of the problem. The Macedonian state is a thoroughly corrupt set of institutions that has stymied democratic development, alienated average citizens, and de-legitimized (especially among Albanians) the possibility and desirability of an ethnically-neutral, citizen-based, liberal state. Together, these twin forces, Albanian social-criminality and Macedonian state-corruption, have moved in tandem, maintaining a democratic facade for Macedonia while the interior of the system has decayed. As the Austrian newspaper, *Salzburger Nachrichten*, writes, Macedonia's decade-long "oasis of peace" veiled an "oasis of corruption and crime."¹ This paper aims to uncover how this tainted oasis contributed to Macedonia's mini-war.

The problems that system-wide corruption generate for post-communist countries are fast becoming recognized as some of the most substantial and stubborn transitional obstacles.² While the states of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union moved, with varying levels of speed and success, to install democratic regimes, a decade of transitional experience has demonstrated that some democratic norms are easier to institutionalize than others. It is one thing, for example, to

hold a free and fair election and ensure fundamental civil liberties. This is no mean feat. But it is even more difficult to move beyond the minimal standards of electoral democracy and reshape the institutions of the state so that the rule of law reigns supreme. Are the police professional, disciplined, and sensitive to minorities? Is the judiciary independent and does it enforce due process? Is the bureaucracy transparent and accountable? Are borders “hard,” i.e., demarcated, patrolled, and monitored? Is the political system insulated from the reach of organized crime? These and other matters of law enforcement and administration cut to the heart of remaking a state that is serviceable for democratic ends. Failure to resolve such problems can leave a state weak and its democracy vulnerable. Such is the case in Macedonia.

Likewise, the role of organized criminal networks in fostering ethnic warfare is under-explored. Traditional perspectives on ethnic conflict fall into one of four categories: (1) primordialism, which emphasizes the role of culture and history in nurturing irreconcilable antipathies among groups;³ (2) instrumentalism, which pins the blame for communal conflict on elite manipulation;⁴ (3) the institutionalist approach, which locates the source of ethnic tension in institutional rules;⁵ and (4) the economic perspective, which focuses on the toll economic decline takes on interethnic relations.⁶ Ethnic conflict is certainly a multifaceted, complex phenomenon. And this implies that adequate explanations will contain a plurality of causes. But something very simple and fundamental is missing from most theories of ethnic war, and that is wars cannot be fought unless access to weapons is secured. Some scholars have focused on this angle, exploring how weak and threatened state security apparatuses aided the creation of paramilitary groups which subsequently unleashed a chain reaction of violence.⁷ However, this critical ingredient in the recipe of ethnic war-making has not been sufficiently appreciated.

In the southern Balkans, the 1990s witnessed the rapid emergence of a powerful Albanian-led mafia. This syndicate directly aided the military buildup of the KLA and, by extension, the Albanian paramilitary forces in southern Serbia (the Liberation Movement of Presevo, Medvedja, and Bujanovac (UCPMB)) and Macedonia (the National Liberation Army (NLA)). While the mafia was not the only funding source of Albanian rebel forces, it played an indispensable role in turning the KLA from a ragtag force into a high-tech military machine. The UCPMB and the NLA exploited the same networks built on kinship and criminality. This is how the requisite weaponry, logistical support, and finances were put in place to bring war to Macedonia. As such, a coalescence of interests between a national liberation movement and a narco-mafia was the enabling factor that made ethnic conflict possible in the Albanian-inhabited lands of Kosovo, southern Serbia, and Macedonia.

No pretense is made that state corruption and cross-border Albanian relations offer a complete rendering of all the factors involved in Macedonia's ethnic troubles. Undoubtedly, cultural fault lines, economic distress, entrenched ethnic inequality, and a poorly functioning democracy have shaped the milieu and the orientation of key actors in important ways. The modest goal of this paper is to take a more targeted approach and highlight how two important, but normally under-appreciated, dimensions matter.

II. The Crime Dimensions of a Transit Country

“... under the pressures of war, sanctions and economic collapse, south-eastern Europe has become one vast factor of criminality, turning over vast quantities of migrants, prostitutes, tobacco, guns and drugs, most of which are destined for the world's largest market – the European Union.”

– Misha Glenny, journalist⁸

A. Macedonia on the Balkan Road

Macedonia is uniquely situated in the Balkans. Whether one travels from north to south, or east to west, the mountain breaks in Macedonia offer a most accessible route. Lying at the very center of the Balkans, Macedonia links Belgrade to Thessaloniki on the Aegean sea, and Istanbul to Durres on the Mediterranean. It is for such reasons that Bismarck once famously remarked that whoever controls Macedonia controls the entire Balkan peninsula. Today, organized criminal networks exploit the advantages once observed by Bismarck.

The Balkan road has different starting points, depending on the goods in question. Prostitution rings begin in Bulgaria, where women from Romania, Moldova, Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus are assembled. Opium destined for Europe originates in the “Golden Crescent” (Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan) and the Caucasus (Georgia and Armenia). It then gets processed into heroin in Turkey and begins its Balkans’ journey. Both Eastern women and Asian narcotics are smuggled across the Bulgarian-Macedonian border, finding their way into Albanian-areas of western Macedonia. At this point, the women are “sold” to Albanian pimps for anywhere from \$500 to \$2,500. Some women stay to work as dancers and prostitutes, others are sent to Kosovo and onto Western Europe. The drugs follow a similar path, but also move forward to Albanian port cities where they creep into Italy, and then onto further destinations. As a sign of its importance, the Balkan road accounts for 70 to 90% of all heroin seizures in Europe. In dollar terms, this is a \$400 billion a year business.⁹ In an otherwise bleak economic picture, the Balkans is one big boom town for those dealing in the illicit commerce of the underworld.

Whereas the EU market has traditionally been the main focus of Balkan criminal

syndicates, the massive influx of western NGOs and peacekeeping troops since the mid-1990s has spurred a heavy increase in domestic demand, particularly for prostitutes. Bosnia was the first to experience this phenomenon, as the trauma of postwar instability, soft borders, weak criminal justice systems, and a critical mass of well-paid Western observers, soldiers, and bureaucrats created a supportive environment for the sex trade. Post-war Kosovo replicated the same pattern. Macedonia too is flooded with the entire alphabet list of international agencies and the presence of KFOR logistical support teams. As expected, over the last several years the trend has been for a portion of the drug and sex industry to serve the local Macedonian market.¹⁰

All over Macedonia the repercussions of organized criminal activity can be felt. The road from Tetovo to Gostivar in western Macedonia is dotted with houses of ill-repute, while specially-designated hotels in Skopje quarantine arrested prostitutes who wait to be shipped back to their home country. In January 2001, German soldiers stationed in Tetovo were implicated in several sex scandals with local prostitution rings. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimates that there are approximately 2,600 illegal female immigrants in Macedonia, 300 of which were repatriated last year. In terms of recreational drug use, Macedonian high school students report the consumption of marijuana and ecstasy are quite common. A study released this year by HOPS (Option for a Healthy Life), revealed that there are between 8,000 to 10,000 drug users in Skopje, most of which are between the ages of 17 and 29 years old. The Interior Ministry places the figure of drug abusers for the country as a whole at between 25,000 and 30,000. Charges of drug abuse have even reached the upper echelons of politics, as televised debates between Branko Crvenkovski (leader of the Social Democratic Party of Macedonia, SDSM), and Ljubco Georgievski (leader of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-Democratic

Party for Macedonian National Unity, VMRO-DPMNE), have erupted into mutual recriminations over drunkenness, cocaine abuse, and insanity.¹¹

The contraband cigarette industry is big business, as Macedonia is a major producer of tobacco. Phony reproductions of Marlboro and other brand product names are packaged and shipped to Serbia, Kosovo, and Montenegro, where they are then sent to western Europe. The domestic market for such cigarettes in Macedonia is lucrative as well insofar as the state tax is avoided. Since exports to Serbia are duty-free, cigarettes are often shipped to Serbia and then make their way back to Macedonia where they are sold by local merchants. In fact, it was a disturbance over the illegal sale of cigarettes that precipitated the first lethal confrontation between the Albanian minority and the nascent Macedonian state in 1992. Rumors of the police beating of an Albanian boy hawking cigarettes prompted a massive Albanian riot in the Bit Pazar neighborhood of Skopje that left 4 dead and 36 Albanians and policemen injured. Such were the early warning signs of the dangerous links in Macedonia between criminal activity, ethnicity, and opposition to the state.¹²

While the footprints of “wholesale” organized criminal activity are noticeable, the “retail” end of crime in Macedonia is beginning to leave an impression as well. Ten percent of the population reports being victimized by robbery. A June 2000 Brima-Gallup poll indicated that 83.1% of the respondents had property stolen worth up to \$5,000. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, most of the burglaries, thefts, and homicides have a drug connection. Surprisingly, very few people actually report their property losses to the police. Low levels of public confidence in the police coupled with massive popular participation in the gray economy reduces the felt-need to involve the police in one’s personal affairs. Indeed, severe economic

conditions in Macedonia have encouraged average people to participate in the gray economy and thereby avoid paying taxes. The unemployment rate among the active population was 45% in February/March 2001, major industrial enterprises employing thousands of workers are set to close, 25% of the population lives below the poverty line and 70% of the population confesses it has only enough money to buy the bare necessities.¹³ In these circumstances, it is not surprising that crime would skyrocket, or that opportunities to transact in the gray economy would be exploited.

Notwithstanding the aforementioned facts, criminal activity has a low visibility in Macedonia. On Skopje's streets, one is hard-pressed to witness civilian run-ins with the police or even to hear police sirens. Certainly this existential feature of Macedonian city life contrasts sharply with any major American city. Public opinion polls conducted by the Brima-Gallup group in late 2000 and early 2001 confirm the low threat levels to personal security. When asked if they were victims of crime over the past three months, 98.9% of those surveyed responded "no" to battery, 98.2% to racketeering, 92.6% to burglary, 94.4% to pick-pocketing, and 96.9% to auto theft. The general calm and safety in Skopje led one OSCE worker to remark, facetiously, that "if you leave out Liechtenstein, Skopje is the safest place in Europe."¹⁴

B. The Ethnic Division of Crime

Crime itself is not a politically salient issue unless and until the ethnic dimension is introduced. Macedonians from all walks of life – from pedestrians to politicians – steadfastly believe that Albanians are responsible for the bulk of criminal activities that take place within the

republic. Former President Kiro Gligorov told me, during an interview in December 2000, that “generally we cannot speak about it, but it is a common truth that certain parts of the population, like the Albanians and others, are more involved in crime than the Macedonians.” Comprising anywhere from 1/4 to 1/3 of Macedonia’s population, ethnic Albanians account for over 50% of the serious crime (according to Macedonian sources) and 80% of the prison population (according to Albanian sources).¹⁵ Macedonian citizens readily point out the towns – Zayas, Velesta, and Aracinovo – where Albanian criminal activity is centered. The media offers another piece of evidence, as the arrest columns in newspapers are filled with Albanian names. Needless to say, this popular image of the Albanian-as-criminal is quite grating to the average law-abiding Albanian. In the view of many Albanians, the criminalization of the Albanian community is a form of scapegoating and racism. After all, it was the great enemy of Albanians – Slobodan Milosevic – who first conflated “Albanian” with “terrorist and criminal” to great effect.

The truth of the matter is that an Albanian criminal network has grown over the last decade that makes it one of the most powerful syndicates in the world. International drug enforcement agencies such as Interpol and Europol, the interior ministries of Italy, Switzerland, Germany and Sweden, the US Drug Enforcement Agency, and the Paris-based Global Drugs Monitor (*Observatoire Geopolitique Des Drogues*) all concur on this point. In the words of a top Italian prosecutor, “Albanian organized crime has become a point of reference for all criminal activity today. Everything passes via the Albanians. The road for drugs and arms and people, meaning illegal immigrants destined for Europe, is in Albanian hands.”¹⁶ There are very few criminal markets the Albanian mafia is not involved in – money laundering, smuggling arms, and trafficking in drugs, prostitutes, illegal migrants, and child slavery comprise its main activities. Displaying

determination and ruthlessness, the Albanian mafia has been able to push the Turks aside in the German heroin market and carve a niche for itself in Italy among the traditional crime families. Among the Italian syndicates, Albanians have special relationships with the United Holy Crown (*Sacra Corona Unita*) and the *'Ndrangheta*. Investigators remark that the speed at which Albanians have taken over trafficking activities is unprecedented.¹⁷

There are seven factors that account for the concentration of Albanians in mafia crime organizations. Two are historical and cultural in origin, whereas the remaining five relate to the peculiar circumstances of the post-communist transition.

1. Communist Repression. Communist Macedonia is not a place fondly remembered by Albanians. Albanians represented a paltry sum in the Macedonian communist party, socialist firms refused to hire them, and western Macedonia, where Albanians are concentrated, was slighted in investment funds. Because protests by Kosovars against Serb repression usually echoed in Tetovo (the Albanian cultural center in Macedonia), the Albanians of western Macedonia came to be regarded as a suspect nationality. The 1980s were a period of severe anti-Albanian repression that touched on all spheres of social life – political expression, education, culture, language, and business activity. Shunned by the socialist production system, Albanians developed a norm of self-reliance, living on the margins of the official economy. They pursued whatever private ventures were allowed by the communists, such as restaurants, small hotels, sweetshops, etc. Even a private system of capital transfer developed that replicated the lending function of a bank. According to Arben Xhaferi, leader of the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA), systematic exclusion and marginalization during communism is what today explains Albanian participation in

illegal activities.¹⁸ Quite simply, it was a strategy for ethnic survival in a hostile environment.

2. An “Omerta” Culture. The Albanians of the southern Balkans in many respects maintain a pre-modern culture. Families are large (average of 6 children in Macedonia) and are linked in a network of clan relations. The Canon of Lek Dukagjini set forth the principles to guide social interactions for Albanian society in the 15th century, and its effects linger today, particularly among the Gheg clans of northern Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia. Codes of conduct based on honor, brotherhood, respect for verbal promises, absolute loyalty to the family and the clan, and the morality of revenge provide norms that serve well surreptitious activities. A whole system of rules inform the *gjakmarrje*, or blood feud, regulating under what circumstances and within what time frame a life may be taken for a life. Not surprisingly, western law enforcement agencies report great difficulty in penetrating clan-based criminal associations and finding willing infiltrators.¹⁹ A proud history of independence from the state and especially deep-seated distrust towards Slav-controlled states also marks Albanian culture. A more rural mode of existence means that traditional institutions, such as patriarchy, and traditional symbols, such as the importance of the gun for manhood, persist. It also means that Albanians put less value in education. This lowers the chances of young people to advance socially through legitimate channels. All of this goes to say that the Albanian cultural setting has created social structures perfectly suited for mafia-type organizations. As Macedonian Economics Professor Yane Miljovski mentioned during an interview, “when the market opened for drugs and arms, a ready-made structure was already in place.”

3. Milosevic’s Reign of Terror. The crackdown that Milosevic brought to Kosovo in 1989 prompted Kosovar society to go underground and set up parallel institutions. Clandestine

nationalist groups were formed at this time with links to an Albanian diaspora in Western Europe that numbers over 500,000. A strong sense of collective consciousness facilitated the imposition of a “tax” on the Albanian diaspora. An astonishing annual remittance of 500 Deutsche Marks was gathered from Albanians in Germany, Switzerland, Belgium, and Denmark. The channeling of these funds back to Kosovo was coordinated by underground Albanian networks. It was by such means that Albanians in Kosovo survived the Milosevic onslaught.²⁰

4. Anarchy in Albania. A fourth development was the collapse of communism in Albania. The opening of this hermetically sealed country brought about the virtual take-over of the state by a kleptocratic elite who privately appropriated the country’s assets. Their rule was brief, however, as the crash of the pyramid scheme in 1997 plummeted Albania into a chaotic condition of lawlessness and rival clan wars. At this time, police depots and military arsenals were raided en masse. Estimates are that half a million weapons came into circulation. Naturally, arms poured into Macedonia and Kosovo.²¹

5. The Yugoslav Wars. During Yugoslavia’s existence, 75% of all heroin destined for Western Europe passed through Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia. This route was made inaccessible by the fighting first in Croatia and then in Bosnia. An alternative route was the Bulgaria-Romania-Slovakia-Czech road, but greater interdiction efforts in Central Europe made this too risky. Consequently, the narcotics’ pipeline was redirected through Albanian-inhabited lands that straddle the borders of Macedonia, southern Serbia, and Kosovo. The 1990s witnessed the border villages of Vratica (Macedonia), Blastica (southern Serbia), and Veliki Trnovac (southern Serbia) become key stations for the transport and storage of heroin. By the mid-1990s, western observers were calling the Albanian clans that operated this entire chain of operations the “Medellin of the

Balkans.’²² Incidentally, this border zone of narco-trafficking is precisely the same area that Albanian paramilitaries traversed to spread war in southern Serbia and Macedonia. This point will be elaborated below.

6. A Caucasus Connection. The collapse of communism created a Caucasus region swamped with ethnic war, fragmenting states, and emboldened criminal organizations. The Albanian mafia received preferential trading status from the emerging drug industry in the Caucasus. Georgian and Armenian antipathy towards the Turks played into Albanian hands as they became the couriers of choice. In this way, the Albanian mafia gradually supplanted the Turks as the main suppliers of heroin into western Europe.

7. The Business of Sanctions-Busting. The final cause of the growth of the Albanian mafia is the impact of international sanctions placed on Yugoslavia in 1992. Ubiquitous smuggling operations unfolded once the sanctions kicked in. Albanian-populated villages in the lands where Macedonia, Kosovo, and southern Serbia meet became lawless zones of contraband smuggling. Yugoslavia lost its membership in Interpol in 1993 and this reduced the surveillance and interdiction capabilities of the Serb police. According to a director of the International Narcotics Enforcement Officers' Association, “[t]he criminals ... found the one country between Asia and Europe which is not a member of Interpol.” Everybody got in on the act. In Albania, mafia groups supplied the Bosnian Serbs and the Yugoslav army with oil. So enmeshed was Albania in the economy of sanctions-busting that one observer writes “the distinctions between state-run criminality, corruption and mafia became almost indistinguishable.” Ethnic Macedonians also took part, engaging in the “moral smuggling” of alcohol, gasoline, and consumer goods to fellow-Slavs in Serbia. Indeed, the EU team set up to monitor the border (Sanctions Assistance Mission

Macedonia (Macsam)) counted an average of 1,000 lorries a week traveling from Macedonia to Serbia.²³

As this last point suggests, Albanians are not the only ethnic group in the Balkans to partake in illegal business ventures. A common point stressed by Albanian journalists, politicians, and intellectuals in Macedonia is that Albanian-run smuggling operations could not exist without the complicity of Macedonians within the state. It is precisely at this juncture that we see the symbiosis between Albanian social-criminality and Macedonian state-corruption. Organized criminal groups need the sanction of those in positions of authority to ensure the safe passage of their goods and the delivery of services to their clientele. Because the police, customs officials, judges, and ministry of interior personnel are overwhelmingly comprised of ethnic Macedonians, Macedonians themselves constitute vital links in the mafia web. After all, the regions of eastern Macedonia that border Bulgaria – the point of entry for narcotics and prostitutes – is 100% ethnically Macedonian. Macedonians themselves recognize this. Aleksandar Damovski, the general manager of the daily newspaper *Dnevnik*, suggested to me that all the agencies dedicated to monitor and combat illegal trade are themselves corrupt. OSCE officials put it this way: “if you are working in a customs station making 450-500 Deutsche Marks as commanders, and if you can make 1,000 - 2,000 Deutsche Marks for every truck that passes, then this is a temptation if you have no professional instincts.” The Macedonian Interior Ministry itself admits that among the most corruptible positions in the state are employees in the custom services, the police, the health care industry, and the tax administration.²⁴

Another example of Albanian-Macedonian collusion comes from the contraband cigarette industry. The three state tobacco companies in Macedonia are operated and run by ethnic

Macedonians. However, Albanians appear to be the only ones ever getting arrested for selling cigarettes illegally. Undoubtedly, corrupt Macedonians within the tobacco enterprises sell their wares to Albanians, who then hawk them on the streets. It is in this way that Albanian arrests fill up the police blotter, but the tentacles of the “Macedonian-organized mafia” (a term from Albanian journalist Kim Mehmeti) remain unseen. Let us now build a more complete portrait of Macedonian state corruption.

III. The Criminal-Syndicalist State: Corruption as a Facilitating Variable for Ethnic War

“Whoever controls the state can become corrupt.”

– Arben Xhaferi, leader of the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA), personal interview, (December 13, 2000)

Concepts such as “neo-patrimonialism,” “kleptocracy,” and “sultanism” populate the literature on political corruption. Such terms epitomize regimes where political elites enrich themselves at public expense, where control over state-owned resources is the main prize of political competition, where bureaucracies practice rent-seeking behavior, where votes, support, and loyalty are maintained by patron-client networks, and where the rule of law bows to the rule of money and personal connections.²⁵ In Macedonia, corruption is a serious problem. Transparency International, the Berlin-based monitoring agency for corruption worldwide, ranked Macedonia in 1999 at 63 out of 99 possible positions. Sharing this ranking with Macedonia were the states of Bulgaria, Romania, Egypt, and Ghana. On a scale of zero to ten, where ten represents no corruption and zero denotes complete corruption, Macedonia’s score was 3.3.²⁶ Data made public by the Interior Ministry demonstrates government awareness of the problem. Between 1997 and

mid-2000, there were 134 cases of corruption filed against government employees. Such charges included solicitation or offer of bribes, illegal intermediaries, and the disclosure of business or trade secrets. In addition, there were 567 incidences of the “abuse of official authority.” These facts and figures are not lost on the public. Opinion polls repeatedly indicate that after set of economic concerns (unemployment, low salaries, poverty, high prices), corruption is the single most important issue facing the country.²⁷

A. “Sultanistic Parties”

What we are dealing with now, is stealing from the people’s property to create a new capitalist class.”

– Kim Mehmeti, Albanian journalist, personal interview, (December 5, 2000)

The principal site of corruption in Macedonia is the political party. Multi-party, interethnic coalitions have been a regular feature of Macedonian political life since independence, but those coalitions are built more on the basis of “coalitions of convenience” rather than “commitment.” Parties seek office not to implement grand political principles but for the patronage and material benefits that come with ministerial portfolios. This resembles the classic combination of political “bosses,” “machines,” and “spoils” found throughout the developing world and most famously in American cities in the previous century. Three general patterns of behavior can be discerned. One approach is for a party to “take-over” a particular state institution once a party member is appointed as its director. In other words, all key positions within the institution will be filled by party members. This happens routinely with state-owned enterprises, and most recently with the Albanian-controlled (i.e., Democratic Party for Albanians) Public Enterprise for Airport Services. A second tendency is for a party-controlled, state enterprises to

be used as the personal property of party members. In this instance, the resources and assets of the enterprise will be raided by the party for its own gain or pleasure. This was the unfortunate fate of the Hotel Molika under the direction of the leading Macedonian party (the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-Democratic Party of Macedonian National Unity, or VMRO-DPMNE).²⁸

A third avenue for corruption is seen in the privatization process. Privatization as a whole has been a less than satisfactory experience in Macedonia. In the assessment of the United Nations Development Program team in Skopje, “ten years of quasi-privatization” has brought nothing but internal squabbles between political parties, management and labor, and different management groups. When privatization did occur, “the only goal of the insiders was to gain ownership of the company, without no vision for the future of the enterprise.” Furthermore, “ownership is still not defined, there is no clear distinction between the roles of owner, manager and worker, and corporate management is nonexistent. In this context, politics has prevailed over economics. Graft is legion, and rumors circulate in the press of the “Mr. Ten Percents,” or politicians who trade votes for a skim off the sale of state firms.²⁹

Since the 1998 elections, which brought the two nationalist parties of each ethnic bloc into power – VMRO and DPA – corruption in the privatization process has worsened. Antonie Mitrev, who played a role in drafting privatization laws in the former Social Democratic government, emphasized in a personal interview that the problem with the VMRO-DPA coalition government is that it did not require competitive bidding and had no open rules or procedures to guide the privatization process. The government could alter the value of a company without explanation if it felt this would attract foreign investment. Such under-regulation and lack of transparency made for

speculations and skepticism in the press and society. In this general atmosphere, the leading figures of the major parties have come under suspicion for corruption. Albanian and Macedonian scholars alike call the DPA and VMRO “sultanistic parties” whose leading figures “are among the richest individuals in the country.”³⁰ One of the most celebrated cases, in this regard, is the affair involving VMRO Defense Minister Ljuben Paunovski. In April 2001, the media reported that Paunovski funneled around \$5 million dollars in defense contracts to companies owned by family relatives. Denying any wrongdoing, Paunovski countercharged that Prime Minister Ljubco Georgievski (VMRO-DPMNE) had been less than honest about business relations with the Greek-owned oil refinery OKTA. According to a variety of sources, Xhaferi and the DPA have mafia ties. Most recently, former Interior Minister Pavle Trajanov accused the deputy head of the DPA, Menduh Thaci, with being the ringleader of the cigarette smuggling business. The other main Albanian party, the Party for Democratic Prosperity, was singled out by *Jane’s Intelligence Review* for receiving hard currency from foreign drug profits. It is in light of such party intrigues that Aleksandar Damovski of *Dnevnik* laments “no one thinks how to find an honest politician, only one more or less corrupt.”³¹

B. A Weak Civil Society

If we move from the high end of politics to the point of contact between the state and its citizens, we find corruption and abuse of authority every bit as pronounced. The legal system is completely underdeveloped and cannot guarantee due process. Albanians, in particular suffer from this state of affairs. Countless stories exist of Albanians being beaten by the police, confessions secured under duress, suspicious deaths of those in police custody, judges who ignore

abuses, defense lawyers who are threatened by the police, collusion between judges and prosecutors, police detainees denied attorney visitations, and illegal payoffs to court officials. Policemen are rarely held accountable for using excessive force. From the Albanian perspective, the Macedonian criminal justice system has all the markings of being ethnically-biased. The Interior Ministers of Ljubomir Frckovski (1992-1996) and Tomislav Cokrevski (1996-1998) have been singled out for special criticism. Independent Albanian journalist Kim Mehmeti writes that Frckovski “patented the government’s approach to the Albanian question – hit first and then maybe offer some concessions, but not today if you can put it off till tomorrow.”³² In short, Albanians only feel the “rule,” not the “law,” of the state.

What enables the on-going abuses throughout the entire chain of authority is a complete lack of pressure for accountability and transparency. There is a noticeable dearth of active citizen groups who, in a normal democracy, monitor and criticize institutions, disseminate information about abuses, and rally the public to pressure the government for changes. Whereas one can find the whole gamut of international agencies on duty in Macedonia, indigenous interest groups that champion the consumer, the worker, the pensioner, the environment, etc. are barely visible. There are no Macedonian “Ralph Naders” or “marches on Washington” that represent a regularized form of mass pressure from below. To be sure, workers strike frequently and opposition parties routinely hold rallies. But Macedonia’s political elite really do not feel the heat of engaged, active, robust, self-sustaining citizen-organizations. Instead, citizens display an apathetic syndrome, declining to participate and demonstrating detachment from political parties.³³ When protests do occur, politicians are quick to denounce them as part of a conspiratorial “Plan B” of an opposing party. This demonstrates that among politicians themselves the very idea of a loyal

opposition and the right of citizens to assemble and petition government has yet to be completely accepted or understood.

In many respects, the IGOs that exist on the ground act as a kind of ersatz for a weak civil society. Young Macedonians get employment from such groups, but the financing and the impetus all come from outside the country. In a perverted way, therefore, the overwhelming presence of international agencies actually inhibits the development of indigenous citizen groups. Moreover, the money IGOs bring into the system creates the potential for corruption at the grassroots level. According to Ljubomir Frckovski, “if you have organized crime, everything will be like in a broken mirror. You have quasi-democratic institutions, pressures in elections, guys who are completely corrupt, who put their money in civil society and find it profitable, producing quasi-NGOs or mafia-NGOs, and all the money [from international institutions] gets absorbed.”³⁴

Weak civic engagement in Macedonia is exacerbated by the role of the media. Most newspapers are party or government affiliated. As a result, they tend to run very unbalanced and politically-biased stories. *Dnevnik* is the one newspaper that has a degree of independence and respect for neutrality. But even it has been subject to pressures from the government and prominent individuals regarding particular stories. One of the most outrageous incidents occurred when Ljubco Palevski, the owner of the magazine *Start*, burst into *Dnevnik*'s offices with a gun complaining about stories that exposed his suspicious business dealings. The result is a “chilling effect” that limits the investigative depth journalists are willing to pursue. Society is thus deprived of a vital institutional voice that makes democracy work.

C. Corruption and State Vulnerability to Ethnic Conflict

Corruption has a decisively corrosive effect on the legitimacy of the system. It deadens public enthusiasm for participation, it erodes mass confidence in political institutions, and it makes a mockery of the idea of the rule of law state. In October 2000, a Brima-Gallup poll registering public trust in government found that 62.2% did not trust the parliament, 58.1% the government, 61% the attorney general, 59.6% the courts, 62.3% the banks, and 51.3% the police.³⁵ In the constitutional struggles between Macedonians and Albanians, the preferred option of the Macedonian side is the rule of law state, known as the *gradjanska drzava* [civil state] in the local parlance. This contrasts with the Albanian demand for a consensual or consociational democracy. The problem, for the Macedonian position, is that the rule of law is nowhere to be found. If average Macedonians regard their system as full of bribery, graft, and extortion, how then can Albanians be expected to sign onto this normative regime? It is at this gap between Macedonian hope and reality that corruption becomes a facilitating variable for ethnic war.

The lock that the “sultanistic” parties have on the system has frustrated those impatient for faster and wider changes. To be sure, a persistent theme of NGO and IGO publications on minority rights in Macedonia is that there has been improvement over time, specifically since the 1998 VMRO-DPA coalition.³⁶ However, radical segments in the Albanian community regard Xhaferi as a sell-out. They are upset at the compromises he has made over issues of higher education and the shelving of a more radical agenda that included federalization. This feeling is most pronounced among young Albanians who are angry about entrenched inequality, police abuse, Macedonian cultural hegemony, and dim economic prospects. Unlike Macedonian youth, who face an economic future similarly dim, Albanian radicals have the “Kosovo card” available. By utilizing this option, young Albanian nationalists hoped to deliver an exogenous shock that would

compel Macedonia's institutions to redress their grievances. In this sense, the NLA strike on Macedonia can be framed as a radical response to an impotent civil society and a corrupt polity.

IV. Merchants of Death and Freedom Fighters: The Ingredients of Ethnic War-Making

“We have been planning this for years. We are not some new group that was just cobbled together.”

– Ali Aliu, commander of the NLA base in Selce, Macedonia³⁷

The purpose of this section is to map the Albanian underworld's relationship to the National Liberation Army. The partnership between a criminal organization and a national liberation movement is not a unique state of affairs. As the Cold War ended state sponsorship for national liberation movements declined, *pari passu*. Groups dedicated to advancing their cause militarily have been forced to seek alternative sources of funding. For example, rebel groups in Columbia (the Columbian Revolutionary Forces), Sri Lanka (the Tamil Tigers), and Spain (ETA) have turned to drug trafficking to ensure a steady stream of income for weapons purchases. A 2000 report by the Global Drugs Monitor group lists 30 such paramilitary formations around the world that depend on drug sales for revenue.³⁸ What the Albanians have done in the Balkans is part of this larger trend.

Some observers have advanced an extreme position, contending that the entire Albanian national movement is but a front for a vast criminal operation. The French criminologist Xavier Raufer is an example. He contends that the campaigns waged by the UCPMB in southern Serbia and the NLA in Macedonia were dedicated solely to keeping the heroin lanes open. Raufer calls the roads between southern Serbia and Macedonia that lead into Kosovo the “Balkan Golden Triangle.” The UCPMB and the NLA are, in Raufer's opinion, “representatives of the semi-

military wing of the Albanian mafia.” In his view, “there is no doubt that the offensive of Albanian terrorists is motivated by the wish for control of the drug road.” A second point by Raufer is that it is impossible to differentiate the Albanian mafia from Albanian paramilitary forces. In the borderland zone, clans contribute both to the war cause and sell heroin. Whole villages are involved, contributing men to the paramilitary forces and contributing cash via the heroin trade.³⁹

Surely this is too much. The top leadership of the Albanian paramilitary forces have no identifiable participation in the drug trade. To be sure, Michel Koutouzis, analyst for Global Drugs Monitor, asserts that the rise to power of Hasim Thaci’s KLA-faction in Kosovo was aided by his close relationship to the mafia.⁴⁰ But a relationship is one thing, active involvement in the drug trade and subservience to the traffickers are something else. Most leaders of the Albanian paramilitaries are simply men sorely aggrieved by the plight of Albanians in the southern Balkans and have taken up arms to pursue their national cause. Likewise, some Albanian villages are entangled in the drug trade, but certainly not all or even most. Albanian paramilitary recruits are typically young men who are motivated by political, not criminal, ends. It is true that Albanian drug lords have been critical to the success of the national movements. In some locales, drug lords have even led paramilitary units. There are also many points of contact between mafia bosses and the political-military elite. At the same time, an analytic distinction needs to be made between the two sets of groups.

The section below explores a number of different themes and angles, the aim being to uncover the precise relationship between the Albanian mafia and the National Liberation Army in Macedonia. Let us start this story with the first bursts of gunfire in the Macedonian village of

Tanusevci in mid-February 2001.

A. A Buffer Zone and a Transit Zone

“It is not by chance that the first outbreak of violence this year was in the village of Tanusevci, near the border with Kosova. The people living there have no proper roads to give them access to Skopje, no opportunity to work for their living, no real economic prospects at all. Their only way of earning is smuggling, both into Serbia and Kosova, and back into Macedonia.”

– Saso Klekovski, Executive Director of the Macedonian Center for International Cooperation⁴¹

1. The Tanusevci Story. No one disputes that what happened in the village of Tanusevci on February 17th marks the beginning of the war. January had witnessed several mysterious terrorist incidents, but Tanusevci represents the first direct confrontation between the Macedonian state and the NLA. What is indeterminate is what precipitated the encounter. One noted Macedonian commentator pins the blame on raiding criminal groups from Kosovo. Saso Ordanoski, editor-in-chief of the magazine *Forum*, argues that an overriding interest of the Albanian mafia is to keep the border areas politically unstable. Kim Mehmeti suggests the fighting was the reaction of fearful villagers to police harassment. Others have noticed the timing of the NLA attack – the border between Serbia and Macedonia was officially demarcated on the 16th of February. This agreement forced the hand of the NLA, whose plans for a greater Kosovo would be stymied by hardening borders. Finally, according to Fazli Veliu, one of the main organizers of the NLA, the firefight was sparked when the Macedonian army unintentionally discovered a huge arms cache in the village. All of these interpretations have some merit, but the last two best fit the known facts.⁴²

Tanusevci is a remote, inaccessible, impoverished Albanian village that borders Kosovo.

During Yugoslavia's existence, the border was meaningless, as the Albanian villagers went to the Kosovo town of Viti for health care, schooling, and business. Most villagers reportedly felt they were in Kosovo. This is just one reason why the border demarcation between Serbia and Macedonia in mid-February was so troubling to the village's inhabitants. A hard border would cut them off from their economic lifeline. Skopje was distant and foreign to these villagers, whose only irregular encounter with a Macedonian would have been in the form of a policeman. An additional problem was that the inhabitants were never issued identity papers by the Macedonian state, which has made their legal status in Macedonia permanently precarious. In the late 1990s, Tanusevci became a transit point for weapons destined for the KLA. This prompted several incursions by the Serbian military, who tormented the villagers. Once the war in Kosovo was over, Tanusevci and other remote villages in Macedonia became storage sites for KLA weaponry that was supposed to have been turned into KFOR. When the UCPMB insurrection began in southern Serbia, Tanusevci again served as an arms conduit.⁴³

Amidst a rush of terrorist attacks in January, numerous reports began to circulate of the movement of uniformed men on the Kosovo-Macedonia border. On February 12th, a reporter for the television channel A1 and her crew ventured into Tanusevci, where they were surrounded and detained by NLA soldiers. When the Macedonian police intervened to investigate, the skirmishes began. By the beginning of March, American-led KFOR units were drawn into the mix. The American peacekeeping zone in Kosovo abuts Macedonia at this geographic point. Coordinating their actions with the Macedonian army, the American contingent took control of Kosovo's border town, Upper Mijak, wounding two Albanian gunmen in the process. This was not the first time that violence had occurred in this region. From 1999 to 2000 several deadly acts were committed

against Macedonian army personnel. This time, however, KFOR's entry into the fray raised the stakes, as the Albanian paramilitaries were ordered to evacuate the area and leave their stockpile of arms behind. Internal debates within the NLA leadership over its next move ensued, with those advocating an offensive in Tetovo winning the day. From this point on, Macedonia's mini-war began.⁴⁴

The geographic region where southern Serbia, Kosovo, and Macedonia meet is a land of difficult mountain terrain dotted with Albanian villages. Over the course of the 1990s this area became the key passage way for the Balkan narcotics road. The "Fifteen Families" that control this land financed the KLA in its early years. Upon NATO's arrival in Kosovo in 1999, a "ground safety zone" 3 miles wide and 50 miles long was established over a strip of land just inside southern Serbia that separates Kosovo from the Presevo valley. The purpose of this was to ensure some distance between Serbian and NATO forces. The ensuing power vacuum allowed the formation of the Liberation Army of Presevo, Medvedja, and Bujanovac (UCPMB), which made its first appearance in January 2000. At this point, a strange confluence of interests between the Albanian mafia, Albanian nationalists, and NATO developed. As long as Slobodan Milosevic was in power, NATO did not mind the continued prodding and squeezing of the regime in Belgrade by Albanian militants. Consequently, ex-KLA fighters used the security vacuum to extend protection to their Albanian kin and pursue the dream of a greater Kosovo. In the words of one NLA member, "the Americans look at the stars when we go by."⁴⁵ Mafia interests were protected as well. The UCPMB captured Veliki Trnovac -- a major hub of heroin trafficking -- in 2000. By January 2001, sightings were reported of UCPMB forces guarding the road and employing civilians to maintain it.⁴⁶

Senate Republicans had already raised some fundamental questions about this disturbing intersection of interests between Albanian paramilitaries, the mafia, and the foreign policy of the Clinton Administration. A briefing paper was written by the Senate Republican staff in March 1999. This document explored the myriad relations between the KLA and the mafia, concluding that mafia funding was crucial for the formation of the KLA. Senator Charles Grassley (Iowa) queried the Clinton administration about the ties, but was stonewalled.⁴⁷ As events unfolded in 1999, opposition to Milosevic overrode worrisome KLA-mafia collaboration.

With the removal of Milosevic in October 2000, the Albanian insurgency turned from pragmatic tool of western foreign policy to a major threat to Belgrade's new democracy and peace in the region. The UCPMB and NLA theater of operations were only 12 miles apart, but KFOR was unable to rein in the rebels and prevent the spread of war to Macedonia. The US has come under intense fire from the European press for its mishandling of the buffer zone.⁴⁸ Conspiracy theorists of various shades and stripes have had a field day with this unholy mix of actors and interests. Nevertheless, the ineffectiveness of KFOR troops has as much to do with geography as it does policy; for once NATO made the decision to clamp down on movement along the border, it was still unable to shut off the flow. As one NATO official acknowledges, the border "runs through high mountain ranges covered with forests. You could hide a battalion out there and we'd never find it. They also have the support of local villages in providing food, shelter, and information on KFOR ambushes. They ferry weapons, reinforcements and ammunition by mule trains on routes well away from roads or known tracks. These people have key knowledge of the terrain."⁴⁹ Indeed, a tour of the border by helicopter led US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to conclude that closing it would be "next to impossible."⁵⁰

Let us now examine how the Albanian paramilitary forces were constructed.

B. The KLA-Mafia Link

1. The Hard Evidence. When Kosovo went underground in 1989, the Albanian expatriate communities and mafia groups marshaled their assets. According to Ralf Mutschke, assistant intelligence director of Interpol, the KLA was assembled financially by \$163 million in donations from the Albanian diaspora and \$250 million from the Albanian heroin mafia. A U.S. Congressional briefing paper divulged that “between 30 and 50% of the KLA’s money comes from drugs.” Another estimate places the total amount of narco-profits sent to Kosovo, Albania, and Macedonia in 1993 alone at \$1 billion. Finally, the *Berliner Zeitung* quotes a western intelligence official who says that 900 DEM reached the Kosovo guerrillas, with half of that coming from drug money.⁵¹

The first indication of the drugs-for-arms trade occurred in 1991, when Swiss police broke up an Albanian criminal gang in Berne and Basle. Swiss authorities reported that Albanian mafia clans were selling heroin on Swiss streets and using the cash to purchase to Kalashnikov rifles and Uzi submachine guns. The weapons were then piped back into Kosovo. The Italian connection for arms only began after the Kosovo war had commenced. At that point, Albanian interclan rivalry for Italian markets ceased and all criminal outfits worked to funnel arms to the KLA. The most solid proof of such operations are the arrest records of the Italian police. In June 1998, close to 100 Albanian arms traffickers were arrested in Italy for smuggling weapons to Kosovo. In August 1998, Italian police arrested a Kosovar Albanian and a Swiss national for attempting to smuggle military supplies into Kosovo. And in early 1999, an Italian court in Brindisi convicted

Amarildo Vrioni, an Albanian trafficker, of drugs-for-arms transactions. Russia was another source for arms, as the Albanian mafia got weapons from Russian soldiers in exchange heroin.⁵²

2. Diaspora Funding. Along with cash from dubious origins, Albanian paramilitaries rely on fund-raising efforts that target the 500,000-strong Albanian community in western Europe and 400,000 Albanian-Americans. In the USA, a fund named "Home Land Calling," was set up in Bridgeport, Connecticut to underwrite the Kosovo war effort. In Europe, a rather elaborate scheme of advertising bank names and account numbers in major newspapers for direct deposits was organized in Sweden, Italy, and Belgium. Those in charge of this cash flow used it to purchase and ship non-lethal military supplies to the region, such as radios, night vision equipment and bullet-proof vests. Much of the money provides humanitarian relief as well.

It is doubtful whether average emigre Albanians are aware of the infiltration of organized criminal elements in the channeling of this money. Nonetheless, the shadow of the mafia is there. *Jane's Intelligence Review* points out that the Albanian emigre funds are convenient shields for the laundering of drug money. In Dusseldorf in 1998 German investigators closed two bank accounts after a known Kosovar drug trafficker made deposits. The accounts were opened by Bujar Bukovski, the "prime minister" of the Kosovo government when it was in exile. In another case in Dusseldorf, the police stumbled upon a fictitious Albanian travel agency that was a front for laundering money to the KLA. Apparently, the money was moved by outfitting Albanian travelers with money belts. A single courier could carry 6 million Deutsche Marks. Before the travel agency was discovered, \$150 million had been sent to Kosovo. German drug investigators estimate that \$1.5 billion in drug profits is laundered annually by Kosovo smugglers.⁵³

3. Who's Who in the Albanian Mafia. Mafia-style organizations are often known for their colorful and flamboyant bosses, and the Albanian mafia is no exception. Agim Gashi, "Prince Dobrosi," and Daut Kadriovski are the few personalities known to the outside world. A brief biography of each serves to put a human face on this underworld organization.

Originally from Pristina, Gashi moved his criminal organization to Milan in 1992. After his arrival, he developed close relations with the 'Ndrangheta [the Calabria Mafia] and quickly gained a foothold in the heroin market. In 1998, with Kosovo in a state of seige, he used the profits from his trade to supply the KLA with night vision goggles, satellite phones, bullet-proof vests, bazookas, and hand grenades. Italian authorities credit him with substantially upgrading the fighting capabilities of the KLA. Eventually he was arrested in Italy for heroin trafficking.

Another renown figure is Prince Dobrosi. From the Kosovo town (Dobrosin) that bears his *nom de guerre*, Dobrosi controlled the "northern line" of the Balkan route that angled through the Czech Republic and supplied Scandinavia with heroin. Ninety percent of Scandinavia's heroin crosses the Czech Republic, and Prince Dobrosi orchestrated this massive organization. He was arrested, along with 42 of his operatives, by the Czech police on February 23, 1999, and extradited to Norway, from where he had previously escaped from prison. Documents found in his apartment prove that his drug sales were used to purchase arms for transit to Kosovo. In an embarrassment for the Kosovo political leadership, Dobrosi once met with Ibrahim Rugova, leader of the Democratic League of Kosovo, at a banquet in Prague in December 1998.⁵⁴

A third personality is Daut Kadriovski. A leading figure in the "15 Families" that run the

transit zone in the Balkan borderlands, Kadriovski orchestrated a smuggling venture that pumped 100 kilos of heroin into New York and Philadelphia. With the proceeds of these sales, he turned into a major benefactor of the KLA. Arrested in Germany in 1985, he bribed his way out of prison in 1993. From there, he reportedly set up camp in the USA where he continues to run his business operations.

Taken altogether, the above facts demonstrate that the mafia has been a critical factor in the military buildup of the KLA. The Albanian mafia emerged in the early 1990s. When conflict came to the homeland, connections to purchase weapons and the requisite structure to move them were already in place. This logistical advantage altered the opportunity structure and balance of power within Kosovar political society. It enabled a new generation of radicals, led by Hasim Thaci, to seize the moment and wrench Kosovo's direction away from the pacifist orientation of Ibrahim Rugova. Furthermore, the success of this strategy offered a model to resolve the unfinished business of Albanians who still remained under Slav control in southern Serbia and Macedonia.

C. The National Liberation Army

NLA ties to the mafia are not as obvious as the KLA. The difference is that neither the NLA nor the UCPMB had to start from scratch. Instead, both had the luxury of relying on KLA supplies of military hardware, logistical networks, and KLA veterans. Thus, the mafia was one among several sources of funding and weapons procurement.

1. The Men Behind the NLA. The men who stand behind the creation of the National Liberation Army – Ali Ahmeti, Fazli Veliu, and Emrush Xhemajli – are experienced anti-Yugoslav

resisters with long criminal records for subversion and terrorism. They were all members of the executive council of the Popular Movement for Kosovo (LPK). The LPK was created in 1982 on the heels of the eruption of social unrest in Kosovo. It was essentially an underground nationalist cell that wrote manifestoes and brainstormed on ways to achieve Kosovo's independence. All three men are from Macedonia; Veliu is Ahmeti's uncle. Both Ahmeti and Veliu harbor personal grudges against Slav rule: Ahmeti was arrested when he was 16 years old and spent a year and a half in solitary confinement for nationalist agitation in Kosovo. Veliu, for his part, claims that Macedonian police unjustly killed one of his relatives in 1998.⁵⁵ Such are the mixtures of personal vendetta and nationalist ideology that go into the making of Balkan politics.

It was out of the LPK that the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) was born. This took place in 1993 at a secret meeting in Kicevo, in western Macedonia. In attendance were Ahmeti, Veliu, Xhemajli, and Hasim Thaci; the latter eventually became the leader of the KLA and, after the war, the general secretary of the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK). Veliu, Ahmeti, and Xhemajli all participated in the war against Serbia: Ahmeti was stationed in northern Albania organizing raids into Kosovo, Veliu mobilized war funds in Switzerland, and Xhemajli became the KLA secret service director. When Serbia buckled under NATO's aerial bombardment campaign and NATO troops entered Kosovo, the KLA ostensibly agreed to disband. Veliu, Ahmeti, and Xhemajli however, had other plans. At a series of meetings in 1999 they conceived of replicating Kosovo recipe in Macedonia.⁵⁶

Veliu and Ahmeti had already come under the suspicion of the Macedonian authorities for a string of terrorist attacks from 1997 to 1998. An international arrest warrant was issued for Veliu's arrest on the grounds that he was the mastermind behind the "Kicevo terrorists" who

bombed a police station. The German police nabbed him in February 2000. However, highly suspect circumstances occurred that prevented Veliu's extradition. It just so happens that at the time of Veliu's arrest the Minister of Justice was Djevdet Nasufi, an ethnic Albanian and member of the PDA. Nasufi conveniently failed to meet the 45-day time frame to submit the extradition papers. The German authorities subsequently released Veliu. He then moved back to Switzerland where he coordinated diaspora funding for the NLA.⁵⁷

2. Support from Kosovo. The NLA would have been unable to prosecute any kind of war with the Macedonian state without support from Kosovo. The disarmament of the KLA had never been complete, and the full absorption of ex-KLA fighters into either the Kosovo Protection Corps (Kosovo's new police force) or any type of legitimate, gainful employment was impossible. After decades of punishing rule from Belgrade and the chaos of war and ethnic cleansing, Kosovo was, and still is, in shambles. The unemployment rate is 60%, criminal gangs run amok, the legal system is overburdened and chaotic, and a KFOR campaign to turn in weapons was a complete failure.⁵⁸ Countless convoys of war materiel has poured across the border. KFOR border monitors have only been able to interrupt a small percentage of what passes through. In one case, American troops seized a caravan of 5 sports utility vehicles loaded with 27 anti-personnel mines, 40 machine guns, six rocket-propelled grenades, a mortar, eight pistols, and ammunition. By July 2001, over 300 Albanian arms smugglers had been arrested.⁵⁹

Most alarming in all of this is the involvement of the Kosovo Protection Corps (KPC). In April, Gezim Ostreni, a KLA veteran from Debar (Macedonia), was suspended from his post in the KPC for collaborating with the NLA. This was followed several months later by the dismissal

of five other top KPC officials for aiding and abetting the rebels. Among the charges against them was furnishing the NLA with NATO maps and organizing a secret call-up for NLA recruitment.⁶⁰

3. Direct NLA-Mafia Connections . The evidence for direct involvement of the mafia in supporting the NLA is not as abundant as that which documented the underworld network of the KLA. There are two reasons for this: (1) the fighting has just ended in August, so there is a chance that not all the available information has surfaced; and (2) because the KLA had been so successful at stockpiling and concealing its arsenal, it is possible that mafia partnerships were not as necessary in the Macedonian theater. To date, the evidence does suggest some NLA-mafia interactions. The German newspaper *Die Welt*, for example, claims that Dobroshti's bank accounts in the Czech Republic have been the source of millions of dollars channeled to the NLA. Xavier Raufer contends that Tetovo (Macedonia) is the center of operations for receiving this drug money. German police broke up a mafia combination in April 2001 that was in the business of remitting drug money back to Kosovo, to the tune of 150,000 DEM every two weeks. Also in April, two Albanians (Xhavit Hasani and Skender Habibi) were arrested by the UN police in Kosovo for murder, racketeering and extortion. The men were based in Vitina, Kosovo, which is close to the Macedonian border. Vitina was used as a center for NLA financing and recruiting. It is an intriguing fact that Hasani's hometown is Tanusevci. In a rather amazing deal that befits the Balkan penchant for conspiracy, Hasani was earlier released from prison in Macedonia where he had been sentenced to 13 years for 2 attempted murders. This was done, reportedly, in exchange for the release of 4 Macedonian border guards who had been abducted by the KLA in Tanusevci in April 2000. A final report comes from the Macedonian village of Aracinovo, long considered a hotbed of Albanian mafia activities. When the NLA captured this town in June 2001, several of

the “commanders” were the very same local mafia bosses.⁶¹

With more vigorous KFOR patrols in Kosovo intercepting men and arms after February 2001, NLA supply channels shifted to alternative sources and routes. The latest sites for the movement of arms are found in Albania, Montenegro, and Bulgaria. A rebel commander within the NLA, known as “Hoxha,” even claims that arms are being increasingly purchased through the Bulgarian and Macedonia “mafia,” which respects “money, nothing else.”⁶²

4. Support from the Diaspora. To assist the NLA, fund-raising events were again held at clubs, meeting halls, and cultural and sports facilities throughout Europe and North America. Fazli Veliu himself organized a “National Liberation Fund” in Switzerland specifically for the NLA. This time, organizers refrained from publishing bank account numbers in newspapers. Seeking to avoid the attention of the police, the money collected at an event was swiftly transported to Kosovo and Macedonia by money-carrying couriers.⁶³

V. Conclusion

“It’s not difficult to get weapons in the Balkans. You just need money.”
– Ramush Haradinaj, former KLA commander⁶⁴

This paper has argued that Macedonian state corruption and Albanian social-criminality created conditions that compromised Macedonia’s democracy and made the state vulnerable to external aggression. Within the state, Macedonia’s political class practices a party-based nepotism that hampers the efficacy and legitimacy of public institutions. The state appears to most Macedonians as a rent-seeking, unaccountable, indifferent entity. If Macedonians feel this way

about their own state, how could Albanians expect to be satisfied with the status quo? Long-frustrated with their subaltern status in Macedonia, a small group of Albanian nationalists were able to exploit cross-border criminal networks and amass the requisite fire power, logistical support, and finances to deliver a shock to the Macedonian system. It would be a mistake to conclude that state corruption and the Albanian mafia provide a complete explanation of Macedonia's troubles. At the same time, both factors play a pivotal role.

Macedonian corruption and Albanian crime are intimately related in numerous ways. The traditional exclusion of Albanians from the state encouraged a mode of existence on the fringe of legality. Neither drugs nor prostitutes can navigate the eastern border with Bulgaria unless Macedonian customs officials are in the pay of Albanian traffickers. Both ethnic groups are equally in cahoots in the contraband cigarette trade. The kleptocratic elites that run the government have systematically siphoned off public funds for private consumption. This is true of Macedonian and Albanian parties. In many respects, Albanian radical displeasure with the perceived corruption and compromises of Arben Xhaferi and the DPA is what motivated the search for more drastic measures. Macedonia's weak civil society is also unable to exert the type of public pressure that is needed to clean up the state and make politicians responsive to the hardships faced by average citizens. The NLA strike can therefore be framed as an ersatz for an immobile, ineffective political system.

Ultimately though, stacking up the social, economic, and political causes of ethnic strife leaves a gap in the chain of causation. The capacity to wage war does not crop up overnight. In the gap between minority frustrations with a regime and the prosecution of a military offensive,

weapons need to be procured, young men need to be mobilized and trained, and supply networks need to be established. This is where the mafia facilitated the growth of Albanian guerilla forces. The borderlands that connect southern Serbia, Macedonia, and Kosovo are vital shipping lanes for the movement of heroin, prostitutes, and other contraband. Albanian radicals took advantage of this opportunity, securing the support of a burgeoning international Albanian cartel. Notwithstanding the mutual affect both groups have for the Albanian national cause, a more material set of common interests are found in political instability, from which spring insecure borders and impotent law enforcement agencies.

Since the end of the Cold War, ethnic insurgencies have increasingly turned to criminal activities to bankroll their political-military organizations. Without access to war materiel, ethnic groups have no choice but to rely on more conventional manifestations of political competition, such as electoral contestation and social protests. A cursory look at the fate of the Hungarian diaspora in Serbia, Romania, and Slovakia is quite telling in this regard. Hungary's post-communist regional politics have been dedicated to championing the cause of Hungarian minorities in diplomatic and human rights arenas, but not through the barrel of a gun. Consequently, the Hungarian diaspora has had little choice but to play the game of electoral politics as best it could under the national chauvinist regimes of Milosevic, Gheorghe Funar (Transylvanian mayor), and Vladimir Meciar (former prime minister of Slovakia). In contrast, Serb and Albanian diasporas have had a greater range of options before them. Milosevic placed the military assets of the Yugoslav state at the service of Serbs in Croatia and Bosnia; Albanians in Kosovo, southern Serbia, and Macedonia turned Albania's collapse and the rapid rise of the Albanian mafia into an opportunity. Across the Hungarian, Serb, and Albanian cases, the availability of weapons stands

out as the most important determinant of war and peace. Cultural animosities, economic hardship, and nationalist elites shape ethnic relations, but war cannot occur until the means of violence are at hand.

Notes

¹ Stephan Israel, "Mazedonien am Abgrund," *Salzburger Nachrichten*, (May 8, 2001).

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