

State Racism of the West

NATO COUNTRIES' DOUBLE STANDARD

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Most reports from Macedonia focus on the "delicate ethnic balance," which Macedonians supposedly fear can be tipped with the influx of almost a quarter of a million Kosovo refugees (and another 100,000 on their way to the border). This missed the mark. The issues are much simpler than ethnic balance: it's poverty and betrayal.

Last March, before the mass exodus, Macedonia estimated there will be no need to accept more than 20,000 refugees. The Democratic Party of Albanians, one of the three parties sharing in the Macedonian government, persuaded its coalition partners to give the refugees the status of "guests." They were treated as tourists and placed with volunteer families, entering without full registration nor medical inspection. This felt more humane.

My producer Domenico Procacci and I visited the border crossing at Blace on March 28 when reporters outnumbered the refugees by roughly 20:1. Next time I went to Blace, six days later, there were between 30,000 and 50,000 people straddling the Macedonian-Yugoslav border, some still in Kosovo, some in the no-man's land, some safely in Macedonia. Tractors were getting stuck in the mud, as local aid workers were delivering bread and water. Ailing refugees were carried away in blankets doubling as stretchers. There were rumors of nearly a dozen people dying the night before in the camp. The policemen were confused and surprisingly benign, perhaps caught off-guard by the sight of great human tragedy.

As the total number of refugees in Macedonia quickly grew to over 200,000, ten times the estimated figure, it became clear that the government had no idea how to respond to this scale of a crisis. The concept of guests has become ridiculous, and because this "guest" idea prevailed in the days preceding this calamity, no camps were ready.

Even in the best of times, good management is not something Macedonia is celebrated for, and times were far from ideal now.

It doesn't matter whether the refugees are Albanian, Serb, Macedonian, French or American. The two-million population of this impoverished country grew with this scale of forced immigration by 10% within two weeks. Whatever fragile economy Macedonia had is now ancient history: the roads to the rest of Europe have been blown up by NATO bombs, and the Yugoslav companies which traded with Macedonia are in no shape to conduct business. The government projects that the direct losses will surpass \$1.5 billion by year's end, or between a third and half of the nation's GDP. Many companies in Macedonia are laying off people, increasing the 30+% unemployment rate. The per-capita GDP is \$1,900 per year. As a Western reference point, this is a third less than - say - Jamaica. Neither Macedonia's economy nor the social setup could sustain so many refugees.

All of this is seen by the average Macedonian as reward for setting the only bright example of ethnic tolerance and cooperation in the region.

There was no ethnic violence in Macedonia. Albanian and Macedonian parties share power, with ministers and ambassadors from both ethnic groups. After the elections new ethnic Albanian party replaced the old one in the government.

Minorities are protected by the constitution, have their schools, theaters, newspapers, and tv programs. The sole Gypsy parliamentarian in the world is on his second term in the Macedonian parliament.

Macedonia was reluctant to get involved in the Kosovo conflict, and managed to stay violence-free. She doesn't see Kosovo as her war, yet she accepted the clumsily-named NATO extraction troops, but asked for her skies not to be used for attacks on any of its neighbors, since she will have to live with them for centuries to come. This request was promptly ignored. NATO bombs miss an entire country and rock Macedonia on an almost daily basis, one exploding just 2 kilometers from an ammunition factory near Samokov, another one only 200 meters from an important dam in Eastern Macedonia.

And finally, many here felt betrayed when the West - instead of sharing in the burden of caring for the refugees - responded by scolding Macedonia for not doing more and better, and delivered hysterical human rights lectures instead of concrete help. When Macedonia's government got overwhelmed and closed the borders, US's Strobe Talbot flew immediately to Skopje to do some arm-twisting. The stick, of course, came with a carrot: the US promised to house 20,000 refugees in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Several other NATO countries joined.

However, as soon as Macedonia reopened the border, the US reneged on the offer, as did most other West European nations. Finland has promised to accept a total of 50 (fifty) refugees, Estonia 15 (fifteen), Holland 200. The promises, however modest, remained unfulfilled, and only a trickle of refugees leaves the country, as up to 11,000 per 24 hours enter the country. In one instance, France was giving visas only to Catholics, reinforcing the religious divisions which grossly contributed to the current tragedy. The French authorities caused heart-wrenching scenes in Skopje, when families cried in anguish after receiving their visas: often one family member was refused a visa, presumably to warrant the return of the rest to the Balkans. The US is now accepting refugees who already have relatives living in the US.

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In the meantime, the situation is getting worse. The summer of 40+ degrees Celsius is approaching. The independent daily "Dnevnik" reports that the refugees are near a riot. There were cases of refugees breaking in and committing crimes. The Minister of Interior threatened (again) to close the border, in spite of the bad public relations Macedonia could suffer.

Many here feel bitter because the countries which have the means to care for the refugees and who - along with Milosevic - share in the responsibility for the outburst of this humanitarian crisis are trying to hide their racism behind Sadako Ogata's (of UNHCR) ill-informed statement that the refugees should stay close to their homes. As if the refugee will have to walk back to Kosovo once (and if) there is peace and resettlement. The number of refugees struggling to get on the lists of flights to West-European countries are long. Most of them refuse to go to Albania or Turkey.

Even some Macedonian Albanians who are not refugees try to get on these lists themselves.

Macedonia is two hour's flight from most European capitals. Yet, most NATO countries are more concerned with flights carrying bombs than flights carrying back refugees.