



# **The SAGE Encyclopedia of War: Social Science Perspectives**

## **Macedonia**

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Since long before the independence of the Republic of Macedonia, the Macedonian nation and its state-building capacity have suffered from a lack of recognition. Since 1991, the country's national security and well-being have been plagued by more or less interrelated strategic threats despite its explicitly pro-Western orientation. The 2001 conflict between the Macedonian security forces and ethnic Albanian guerrillas was a watershed event, after which the country has never been the same.

Today, Macedonian politics is preoccupied with two major issues: domestic interethnic relations and the prolonged naming dispute with Greece. Both have serious regional implications, with the former also having the potential to ignite the Balkans, especially when—and if—combined with the latter. Thus, although Macedonia continues to stand shoulder to shoulder with Western allies in the Global War on Terror, its desired Euro-Atlantic future remains uncertain.

### Mid-19th and 20th Centuries

In the contemporary process of reshaping the Balkans through war and change, various actors, from formidable great powers and regional hegemony to local ethnocentric forces, have aspired to control the development of the complex but appealing Macedonian narrative. The emergence of a modern Macedonian national identity between the mid-19th and early 20th centuries across the entire territory of the then Ottoman-ruled geographic region of Macedonia posed an immediate challenge to international relations. Macedonians' national defiance and insubordination, as reflected mainly through armed struggle for freedom, independence, and statehood led by the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO), was initially insufficient to earn them an independent state of their own.

At the dusk of the Ottoman Empire, the newborn Balkan states (Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Montenegro), which had already secured their independence, clashed over the territory of geographic Macedonia, backed by Austria-Hungary and the Russian Empire. In the Balkan Wars (1912–1913), ethnic Macedonians went from fighting alongside the Orthodox Balkan League, with its regiments and companies (*chetas*) attached to the neighboring armies, to being compelled to side with conflicting parties and practically exterminating each other.

Geographic Macedonia was devastated; a number of towns and about 200 villages with thousands of homesteads were completely destroyed and ultimately partitioned. On the basis of the 1913 Treaty of Bucharest, Serbia annexed the Vardar part, Bulgaria took the Pirin, and Greece gained the largest and arguably the most fertile swath of land (52%), popularly known as Aegean or White Sea Macedonia.

In the wake of World War II, the majority of ethnic Macedonians in the region accepted the imposing communist leadership and thereby prominently joined the global antifascist coalition. This new ideological layer on top of what had primarily been a national liberation effort was quite understandable; a 1934 Comintern resolution had provided the first and hitherto greatest international recognition of the distinct Macedonian nationality. Thus, as early as 1940, the Aegean Macedonians, backed their Greek Communist compatriots, acted in the defense of northern Greece against the Italian fascist aggressor.

Having survived the turbulent *interbellum* as a south Serbian province (officially termed Vardar Banate or Vardarska Banovina) within the short-lived Kingdom of Yugoslavia, at the end of World War II, Vardar Macedonia was the only part of Macedonia proper to gain statehood and

partial independence. Occupied and divided by Axis powers such as Bulgaria and Italy during the war, Vardar Macedonia, under the leadership of the Communist Party of Macedonia (1943–1990), developed close ties with Tito's pan-Yugoslav partisan resistance. Moreover, toward the end of the war, its growing partisan formations managed to liberate it without any Allied help worthy of mention. This ultimately resulted in the Macedonian nation being unequivocally recognized as one of the six equal constituents of Tito's new federal Yugoslavia.

### **The Cold War Years**

During the Cold War, the newly founded Macedonian Communist state, initially styled as a "people's republic" and subsequently as a "socialist republic," saw high rates of industrialization and growth while also experiencing a partial cultural renaissance. Contrary to its image as an economic "appendix" in the divided Balkans, the country figured prominently in geostrategic terms, having been considered an important locus and corridor in East–West military planning and war games.

As the first line of Yugoslav defense against a potential invasion from the east (Bulgaria had six rocket brigades armed with nuclear-capable missile systems, located only two hours away from the Soviet nuclear warheads stored in the Kiev military district), the NATO-controlled south, or even a China-backed Albania, Socialist Macedonia hosted the Yugoslav People's Army's (JNA) Third Army District Headquarters, along with sophisticated bunkers and air defense systems. Meanwhile, the Macedonians were proportionally represented in the ranks of the conscript-based JNA. Until the late 1980s, when the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia became evident, the existence of a Macedonian state seemed fairly benign to both its neighbors and most great powers traditionally involved in the Balkans.

### **Independence and Following**

The Republic of Macedonia gained its long-sought independence in 1991; moreover, it did so via peaceful means. This historic achievement mobilized many in the region and the international community, most notably in neighboring Greece, where more than a million took to the streets to protest against their northern neighbor's name and its use of other ancient Macedonian symbols.

Under the leadership of its first president, Kiro Gligorov (1917–2012), the newly independent state opted for a three-pillar foreign policy: integration in NATO and the European Union and good neighborly relations based on "equidistance." Aside from the controversial policy of equidistance, which was never truly realized in practice, the Macedonian political elites were unanimous that if the country was to preserve its security and ensure its long-term survival, it had to join an appropriate system of collective security and defense.

Ever since, Macedonia's national security has depended on the evolving regional constellations, the dynamics of the global geopolitical context, and the ability of the domestic political elites to manage the country's simmering interethnic tensions. In April 1992, President Gligorov made a gentleman's deal with the then Yugoslav military brass, thus ensuring the JNA's relatively calm withdrawal from the country.

However, at a time of mounting regional instability and uncertainty, this seminal deal, albeit greatly reassuring, did not eliminate the perceived strategic threats to the young and fragile state. What immediately ensued, besides the continuing Greek objections over the use of the Republic of Macedonia's constitutional symbols (name and flag), was a long sequence of

unfavorable political decisions and events that, by the end of the decade, would determine the country's uneasy future.

After the Kosovo crisis erupted, ill-designed postconflict management by the international community and the inexperienced political elites in Macedonia were unable to prevent it from spilling over. In 2001, well-equipped UÇK (Kosovo Liberation Army) guerrillas from Kosovo, joined by local extremists, waged war on the Macedonian state and security forces, fighting, as stated in their initial communiqués, for ethnic territories. (It was only later that the rhetoric of human rights was widely adopted.) After several months of intermittent clashes, the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) of August 13 ended the conflict. Having subsequently altered the country's interethnic balance—namely, by replacing its majoritarian liberal democratic system with a sort of power-sharing arrangement based on the so-called Badinter principle—the peace-making OFA has been contested to date.

Regardless, thanks to the timely “decisionism” of its senior leadership in light of the September 11, 2001, tragedy, Macedonia soon became “an exporter of peace and security” and a reliable transatlantic partner. In 2002, despite all the domestic challenges, including a lack of popular support for Macedonian participation in remote crisis management operations, the Assembly of the Republic of Macedonia, on insistence by President Boris Trajkovski (1956–2004), gave a green light to dispatching Macedonian troops abroad.

Since joining the global antiterrorist coalition, first in Afghanistan and then in Iraq, the Army of the Republic of Macedonia (ARM) has undergone serious transformation. This is particularly true for its conventional forces, which have been largely restructured and modernized. Learning on the fields around Kabul and between Taji and Tikrit, as well as in Bosnia and Lebanon, and reaching the fourth- and fifth-highest per capita deployment rates in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission, the Macedonians have proved to be modern warriors on many occasions.

Today, with 15 years of peacekeeping experience in its strategic portfolio, over 3,500 troops deployed through numerous rotations just in Afghanistan, and a certain military prestige based on its being among the top per capita troop contributors to (post-)ISAF—an argument highly exploited by Macedonian officials in their prolonged bid for NATO membership—Macedonia is still knocking on the Euro-Atlantic door, the main reason being the same as always: the name issue.

On the other hand, the ARM has never truly experienced NATO's waiting room, not even prior to the 2008 Bucharest summit, at which the allies, while refusing to extend an unconditional invitation to Macedonia, clearly established that the country had met all of the standard membership criteria. The lessons learned from recent deployments are the guiding source in designing the ARM's education and training programs intended not just for future strategic corporals and lieutenants but also for operational warriors.

Nonetheless, although Macedonian peacekeepers have hitherto demonstrated a high level of readiness and professionalism, they alone cannot deter the perceived threat of implosion at home. Contrary to the '90s-era fear of a regional explosion that could engulf the entire Balkans and potentially Europe, Macedonia is nowadays said to be at high risk of internal implosion.

## **Macedonia Today**

Recent intelligence reports warn of a growing polarization of Macedonian society along ethnic, religious, and political lines. Hence, it is believed that if the country is to ensure its own security and territorial integrity while also remaining a decent contributor to regional and global peace, it must pay attention to its security sector, which needs further modernization—including, in particular, defense investments—as well as to its domestic interethnic conundrum, which ought to be thoroughly addressed via an indirect approach.

Although Macedonia can still boast a strong interethnic consensus in favor of its Euro-Atlantic future, the latter nonetheless remains unclear. The numerous hardliners within and outside the Macedonian right have proved to be intransigent over the country's disputed name and heritage. Frustrated over what had come to be seen as a "Bucharest veto," in November 2008, the Macedonian government took the legalistic route to overcoming the perceived Euro-Atlantic blockade. After Greece lost the case before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in late 2011, NATO and the EU maintained that the respective ICJ judgment would not affect their internal solidarity and have since reiterated their support for Macedonia's membership in both organizations, provided that the country finds a "mutually acceptable solution" with its southern neighbor.

The continuing deadlock in Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration only aggravates its domestic situation and solidifies its rigid identity politics. Moreover, with the recent Middle East developments and the global trend of Islamist radicalization affecting primarily the Balkans and Europe, Macedonia is left extraordinarily vulnerable. As a result, since early 2012, there have been attempts to transmute the country's traditional interethnic tensions into a locally unprecedented clash on religious grounds.

**See also** [Civil Wars](#); [European Union](#); [Global War on Terror](#); [Greece, Modern](#); [Kosovo](#); [National Identity](#); [National Security](#); [North Atlantic Treaty Organization](#)

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#### **Further Readings**

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