

Macedonia – 2002 – Assembly Election

I'm Dan Rossington. I'm recording this in March of 2022. 20 years ago I ended the IFES programme supporting Macedonia's parliamentary elections. Over the next few minutes, I'll give a brief description of the situation in Macedonia and its Balkan neighbours and a run up to these elections. The ethnic conflict that preceded them and provide a couple of anecdotes relating to the elections themselves.

First of all, Macedonia was a country with roughly 2 million people 20 years ago. It still is today, maybe a few more. In 2002, there was internationally recognized as the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, usually by the shorthand acronym FYROM. This was to distinguish it from the Greek region of Macedonia, which it bordered. It's fair to say this was a source of irritation, that much humiliation to the country's citizens. It is now known as North Macedonia. I'll be referring to it here as Macedonia, as I usually did when I was in the country. The majority of the group as ethnic, between 60 and 65% of the population and ethnic Albanians, 25 to 30%, these percentages are all these controversial back then, I'm not sure about today.

Prior to Macedonia, I had had some experience with post conflict elections in the mid to late 90s in Bosnia, Albania and Kosovo. My last stop before Skopje was in 1999, just down the road in Christina Kosabel where I was legal adviser to the director of election operations. I opened the Macedonia Office in 2000. Ethnic conflict broke out in Macedonia in early 2001. This was widely seen as unfinished business from the 1998-99 conflict with neighbouring Kosovo. Nothing Albanian insurgents were known as the National Liberation Army. It had close ties to the Cosable Liberation Army. Soon, in retrospect, the first concrete sign of an emerging conflict was in January of 2001, with an attack on a police station and a predominantly Albanian part of the country. One police officer was killed, several were wounded.

For many years, Macedonia had been held up as a Balkan model of ethnic cooperation, if not quite harmony. The ruling ethnic Macedonia political party in 2001 had an ethnic Albanian party as a partner in government. As 2001 progressed, the situation in the country deteriorated rapidly and insurgents clashed with security forces. Privileges were shelled, many thousands were displaced. There was no way to fit a definitive accounting of the number killed. But security forces and insurgents suffered significant losses. It would have been much, much worse that the international community not stepped in as early as it did. International growth at peace talks began with the government of political party leaders. I worked on the sidelines of the talks, reminding the negotiators that we needed time to organize credible elections, diplomats love to

reach agreements on elections. But they underestimate the time needed to conduct them.

Eventually I had to leave Macedonia, given the lies and anti western incidents. Many ethnic Macedonians felt that the West was catering to the Albanian insurgents. Ironically, I was safe at home in Olney, in Virginia on 9/11/2001. It was on one of the first post 911 flights out of Washington DC on my way back to Skopje. The Oakland Agreement had been signed in August and elections were on the table. Much work had to be done. IFES had a wonderful local team, smart and enthusiastic young people, ethnic Albanians and ethnic Macedonians. And we, of course, have tensions reflecting those with the larger society. But our office culture was one of mutual respect and cooperation. Our focus was on assisting the newly established state Election Commission and organizing and conducting elections that would help stabilize the country.

The IFES mission was headed by Mariana Mazarga. She had no previous election experience, but was a highly respected lawyer and civil servant. The local members of the Commission represented the top political parties that were formed along at the blind, at the blinds, Albania and Macedonia. The international community was solidly behind the elections. USAID provided generous funding to IFES and others. The EU financed the purchase of standardized election materials, the UK financed the training of poll workers. Laden and OSE played important roles in keeping peace. I just brought in an All-star-group of international experts in election operations, education and poll worker training. They worked alongside the expanded local staff. We all work hand in glove with the Election Commission, even arranging for the purchase of election materials, overseeing the assembly of polling station kids at the warehouse and the loading of trucks being dispatched to polling stations throughout the country.

The elections weren't perfect, but they exceeded all expectations, particularly in light of the pessimism expressed by stakeholders in the preceding weeks. But we saw a late breaking shift in public perception right before Election Day. Actually, the day before Election Day, I understand commissioned a training video for poll workers to reinforce and supplement in person training. It cost about \$10,000, maybe 11,000 for the dramatization of Election Day. From the opening of the polling station through the election process and the Count, a popular Macedonian actor played a role in polling stations. Here, several TV stations agreed to end the video for poll workers, but it proved so popular among the general public who just happened to tune in that it was blue broadcast by popular demand. We had intended to train poll workers, but we also ended up showing the voters what to expect when they went to cast their votes. All this

was done, of course, in close coordination with the state Election Commission, which had approved the script in the production.

In the end, of the elections, all the preparations were complete. There was no last minute panic, everything was in place for a good technical election. The election materials were at the polling stations. Polling workers have been trained. The voter education programme was a success. Barring violence. Of course, we could not control, but we anticipated the elections would go well, and they did. The high point came after the Prime Minister conceded the election in TV, praising the conduct of the elections, those of us who would have worked so hard were gratified at this unexpected development.

This was something there in my experience. It was, I thought, at the time the hallmark of a mature democracy, a democracy like the United States. It's sobering to realize 20 years on that a gracious concession by the loser of an election is no longer a cherished routine of American democracy. In any case, the gracious concession speech by the Prime Minister didn't speak for all the members of the government. Administrative internal affairs made wild accusations of fraud and attempted to arrest the Commission chair at a meeting scheduled in the evening. She got word of this and sought protection of the presidential security detail to protect her from the Minister. I remember sitting with her in the US diplomat in the safety of the presidential offices of the government building where the Commission held its meetings. As a minister was in the halls looking to arrest her, she wasn't arrested, but the threats didn't stop.

In the following days, political party representatives of the losing coalition on the Commission were replaced by cynical apparatchiks. And trying to have failed to overturn the results, one even made Mafia style threats to intimidate the Commission chair and others on the Commission. The State Commission chair Railana Tri Costa, was a talented and courageous leader. She was also just a regular person. Had some banking to do before coming into the office one day when we were waiting to meet her, I thought it was two days after the elections. She told us what happened when she entered the bank. She was greeted with spontaneous applause from her fellow customers. We were all struck by the sincerity of. Gesture this welcome counterpoint. The failed attempts of sore losers and bad actors to change the outcome of a well run election. This modest woman had accomplished something great in service to democracy and her country. And the people have showed their appreciation. These Macedonian elections of 2002 remain, along with my time in Bosnia in 1996 and Albania in 1997. One of the highlights of my professional life, I still have a great affection. For the Balkans and the good people with whom I work.