

The Rhetoric of War and the Reshaping of Civil Society in North Macedonia

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The “Soros Army”

In the spring of 2017, many self-proclaimed patriotic associations (*patriotski združenija*) from various towns across the Republic of North Macedonia (called, until very recently, the Republic of Macedonia) were added to the country's national registry of non-governmental organizations.¹ Members of twenty-two of these associations came together in early April 2017 and created a union, called the Macedonian National Front. Their proclaimed goal, as stated in their Charter of Cooperation, is the protection of vital national and state interests, including protecting the inviolability of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the unitary character of the state. The signatory associations also stated that they were ready to defend the Fatherland with all available, nonviolent or “permissible” (*dozvolivi*) means, and respect the clearly-expressed will of the people as the sole bearer of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Macedonia. They also denounced any deviation from the principles stated in the Charter as an act of national treason.²

These initiatives emerged in direct response to the first ever call, issued by Nikola Gruevski, former Prime Minister and then leader of the former ruling, right-wing nationalist party VMRO-DPMNE, to “de-Sorosize” Macedonia. The call to rid the country of the influence of Hungarian-born American billionaire George Soros was directed against liberal Macedonian NGOs, including the Foundation Open Society-Macedonia (often called “Soros foundation” in the media and among people), that are funded by Soros. Gruevski's accusations were sharp. In a 2017 New Year's interview with news portal Republika, titled “The civil sector must not remain a monopoly of Soros,” Gruevski described Soros-funded NGOs in Macedonia as a “classic army.” He added the following:

Soros has turned NGOs in Macedonia into a modern army. Today, the battle is not fought with rifles and pistols as it was 100 years ago, but with NGOs, corrupt media and journalists and through influence by powerful foreign media and powerful foreign governments, who direct their policies on a country in

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1. In June 2018, Greece and the then called Republic of Macedonia signed the Prespa Agreement and agreed on the name Republic of North Macedonia, thus ending an acrimonious, decades-long dispute over the use of the name Macedonia. The Agreement came into force in February 2019. On the dispute over the name Macedonia between Greece and the Republic of Macedonia, see, for example, Loring M. Danforth, *The Macedonian Conflict: Ethnic Nationalism in a Transnational World* (Princeton, 1995).

2. See Македонска нација, “Обединување на Македонските Патриотски здруженија” (Unification of the Macedonian Patriotic Associations), at <http://mn.mk/aktuelno/13096-OBEDINUVANJE-NA-MAKEDONSKITE-PATRIOTSKI-ZDRUZENIJA> (accessed May 8, 2019).

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accordance with their own objectives. That is the reality and unfortunately this is how Soros works.³

Members of the army Gruevski described, the so-called Soros army, are generally referred to by the derogatory terms “Sorosoids” (*Sorosojdi*) and “communists” (*komunjari*). In practice, the terms are used loosely to describe individuals who are against the conservative platform of VMRO-DPMNE, irrespective of whether or not they have worked with the Foundation Open Society-Macedonia and regardless of their involvement in projects supported by this Foundation. In other words, anyone opposing conservative social movements and economic policies promulgated by VMRO-DPMNE, such as support for the pro-life movement and of relaxing regulations governing hiring and firing, can be labeled Sorosoid or komujar. Despite the loose application of the name Soros, Gruevski made a direct charge against Soros-funded NGOs and Soros himself, accusing them of influencing domestic politics.

The accusation was issued at a time of deep political crisis, centering on the claim of the center-left and at the time opposition party, the Social Democratic Union (SDSM). The allegation was that in early 2015, Gruevski had instigated a mass illegal wiretapping and surveillance of some 20,000 people. The opposition’s subsequent release of allegedly wiretapped conversations of the then Prime Minister and other senior officials reputedly proved that Gruevski’s government had instigated the illegal operation. Gruevski denied the allegation. He claimed that the tapes had been doctored and that the opposition illegally obtained them from unnamed foreign secret services to destabilize the country. Following Gruevski’s resignation as Prime Minister amid large anti-government protests and pressure from the US and Europe, general elections were held in December 2016. Gruevski’s ruling party won 51 of the 120 seats in parliament and the opposition won 49 (twenty seats went to four other parties). When faced with the prospect of prosecution and imprisonment from an opposition-led coalition government, Gruevski accused Soros-funded NGOs of plotting to steal his election victory and to help establish a government that would undermine Macedonian national interests.

Gruevski’s hard stance against Soros provided the impetus not only for the formation of self-proclaimed patriotic associations, but also for the emergence of the civil initiative “Stop Operation Soros,” by Gruevski supporters. The three founding members of this initiative—Nikola Srbov, a columnist for news portal Kurir; Cvetin Cilimanov, then editor of the English language service of the state-run MIA news agency; and Nenad Mircevski, editor of the news portal Republika—accused the Soros Foundation of planning to erase identities, peoples, and nations and create a so-called open society, whereby anyone from abroad could be in control of the country’s affairs. At the January 17, 2017 press conference announcing the initiative, Nikola Srbov invited all “free-minded and righteous citizens...to join in the fight against one-mindedness

3. “Интервју за ‘Република’: Груевски со книгата на Трамп размислува за ‘лек’ за ‘армијата на Сорос’ во Македонија ” [Interview for ‘Republika’: [Inspired by] Trump’s book, Gruevski thinks about ‘a cure’ for the ‘army of Soros’ in Macedonia], at <https://www.mkd.mk/makedonija/politika/gruevski-so-knigata-na-tramp-razmisluva-za-lek-za-armijata-na-soros-vo> (accessed May 8, 2019).

in the civil sector.”⁴ One of the founders of this initiative and my longtime acquaintance in the field provided the following example of Soros’s alleged meddling in Macedonian affairs: since the release of the supposedly covertly-recorded tapes in 2015, Soros-established local NGOs, in league with SDSM and funded by Soros, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the American embassy in Macedonia had used project funds to organize violent protests and spread propaganda via the news media.⁵ Their alleged aims included toppling Gruevski’s right-wing government, installing a leftist puppet government, and ultimately undermining the autonomy and authority of the Macedonian nation-state.

Accusations against Soros and Soros-funded groups in Macedonia reverberate across much of Europe today. They echo charges made against Soros by Hungary’s populist Prime Minister Viktor Orban. Soros-funded groups have been accused of organizing anti-government protests in Poland, and of using anti-corruption campaigns in Romania, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic to undermine elected officials. In all these examples, Soros and Soros-funded groups are claimed to be opposition supporters and instigators of an “attack” against “our” national identity and interests, as allegedly protected and promoted by conservatives. The stakes are apparently high: erosion of state sovereignty and national identity and a future for the nation-state dictated by “outsiders.”

In this article, I draw upon publicly available documents, including the founding documents of the so-called patriotic organizations and interviews with some organization members to ask the following questions: What are the kinds of local responses produced among people on the ground when political leaders use a populist rhetoric focusing on themes of national vulnerability, external manipulation, and internal threat? What are the evolving intersections between civil society organizations, such as NGOs, and governments? I am especially interested in exploring the meanings with which the notion of civil society is becoming imbued by those who evoke it and bring it to life in Macedonia. As Katherine Verdery has pointed out, “‘civil society’ in post-1989 Eastern Europe is as much a feature of political discourse and symbolism as of societal organization.”⁶

Government Connections

Financial support from the then government provided impetus for the emergence and expansion of these patriotic associations. Immediately after the December 16, 2017 elections, Gruevski announced that his party would fight for the “de-Sorosization” of the country and for the strengthening of the independent civil sector, as well as work toward regulating the financing of indigenous NGOs.⁷ About three months thereafter, at the end of March 2017,

4. Nikola Srbov, Press Conference, at <https://sitel.com.mk/stop-operacija-soros-novogragjansko-dvizhenje-za-desoroizacija-na-makedonija> (accessed May 8, 2019).

5. Cvetin Cilimanov, interview, Skype, early 2018.

6. Katherine Verdery, *What was Socialism, and What Comes Next?* (Princeton, 1996), 104.

7. “Македонија ќе се ослободува од Соросоиди” (Macedonia will be liberated from Sorosoids), at <https://infomax.mk/wp/македонија-ќе-се-ослободува-од-соросо/> (accessed May 8, 2019).

the then VMRO-DPMNE-led government announced financial support totaling €800,000 for associations and foundations. Grants of between €30,000 and €50,000 were awarded to support projects on anti-corruption, fair governance, democracy, human rights, social cohesion, and local self-government, while smaller grants of between €5,000 and €10,000 were awarded to support projects geared toward, among others, economic growth and development.⁸ As some association members told me, associations have gradually shrunk in size as it has become apparent that no advantages, such as financial profit, employment in state administration, or television fame, can be gained from them. Those who have remained are, in the words of one of my interlocutors, “cleaned” (*pročisteni*): reportedly, they do not harbor self-interested motives and they are driven purely out of love for their country, as epitomized in the pre-Balkan War slogan “Macedonia for the Macedonians” (*Makedonija na Makedoncite*) they use as a motto.⁹ This short phrase encapsulates the belief that self-proclaimed patriots will at all costs guard state sovereignty and retain discretion to exclude non-Macedonians—foreign as well as domestic interlopers—from participating in state affairs.

Additionally, association members, including men and women of all ages, are avid VMRO-DPMNE supporters who tend to socialize on numerous occasions, from hunting to drinking and dining together. Some of the founders of these associations (for example, Nepokor in the town of Struga) have also been official members of various local branches of the youth wing organization (Youth Force Union) of VMRO-DPMNE. What is more, many association members participated in pro-government rallies and anti-Soros protests during the spring of 2017. When a new coalition government took office in May 2017 comprised of the Macedonian center-left SDSM party and several ethnic Albanian parties promoting demands to make the Albanian language, spoken by about one-quarter of the country’s population, official throughout the Republic, they took to ongoing anti-government protests. At present Albanian is used as an official language, in addition to Macedonian, in the units of self-government where at least twenty percent of the population speaks Albanian.

8. Maja Jovanovska, “Владата со 800,000 Евра ќе финансира невладини здруженија и фондации” (The government will grant non-governmental associations and foundations 800,000 Euros) at <http://novatv.mk/vladata-so-800-000-evra-ke-finansira-nevladini-zdruzhenija-i-fondatsii/> (accessed May 9, 2019).

9. See Tchavdar Marinov, “We, the Macedonians: The Paths of Macedonian Supra-Nationalism (1878-1912),” in Diana Mishkova, ed., *We, the People: Politics of National Peculiarity in Southeastern Europe* (Budapest, 2009): 107–37. It should also be noted that in the period before the Balkan Wars, the slogan, while favored by speakers of what today we would call (and what many of them then called) Macedonian, could have also been used by speakers of other, non-Slavic languages, such as Aromanian and Albanian. Evidence to support this claim is found in the Aromanian and Albanian names, which were recorded in the Ellis Island archives, of people who identified themselves as “Macedonian” when they reached America at the beginning of the twentieth century (Victor Friedman, personal communication). On this point, also see Keith Brown “Friction in the Archives: On ‘Macedonians,’ Macedonians and the Ottoman Transatlantic,” *Balkanistica* 28 (2015): 41–63. Many thanks to Victor Friedman for his generous help with the information in this footnote.

Many association activists, along with other VMRO-DPMNE supporters, stormed the Parliament building on April 27, 2017—a day that came to be known as “Bloody Thursday”—in the Macedonian capital of Skopje after an ethnic Albanian MP, Talat Xhaferi, was elected as parliament speaker. In so doing, they breathed new meaning into the term “permissible,” describing in the Charter of Cooperation of the Macedonian National Front their readiness to defend Macedonia at all costs, whereby violence came to be part of the arsenal of means at the associations’ disposal. A former high-ranking officer in the Macedonian army, Xhaferi deserted the Macedonian Army and joined the Albanian National Liberation Army (NLA) during a six-month long insurgency instigated by the NLA in 2001 to achieve, as the NLA claimed, greater rights for Albanians in Macedonia. Notwithstanding such claims, many Macedonians viewed the insurgency as yet another expression of Albanians’ alleged aspirations to partition Macedonia and unify the predominantly Albanian-inhabited areas of northwestern Macedonia with Albania and Kosovo.¹⁰ Xhaferi was thus regarded largely with distrust and hostility. His duties as parliament speaker included petitioning Macedonia’s President Gjorge Ivanov to ask SDSM leader Zoran Zaev to form a government. As shown in videos that went viral, protestors threw chairs, tripods, and punches at lawmakers, bloodying Zaev and injuring tens of others, including journalists. SDSM deputy leader Radmila Shekerinska needed stitches after she was dragged around by her hair; Albanian leader of the Movement for Reforms-Democratic Party of Albanians Zijadin Sela was knocked unconscious and was near death. The assailants waved Macedonian flags and shouted “traitors” (*predavnici*) at the lawmakers, thus implying that the Macedonian lawmakers were reputedly eager to compromise Macedonian national interests and state sovereignty by allowing an MP from the Albanian minority (a former NLA insurgent at that) to be at the helm of state affairs. The very term minority to describe the Albanian population is heavily contested in Macedonia. For many Albanians, the term is derogatory, as it denies the claim to Albanian autochthony in Macedonia. On the other hand, for many Macedonians, especially conservatives, the term connotes a hierarchical relationship whereby ethnic Macedonians are the “owners” of the Macedonian state and ethnic Albanians exist in a relation of subordination. Along this line of thought, the eagerness of the Macedonian social democrats to extend so-called privileges to the Albanian minority was seen as aligning with Soros’s alleged goals of supporting leftist organizations, whose work toward creating a more inclusive society supposedly undermines national interests and erodes the nation-state.

These patriotic associations further articulate in the Charter of Cooperation their support for several distinct nationalist VMRO-DPMNE positions. Specifically, the Charter affirms adherence to the 1991 Founding Constitution, whereby Macedonia is defined as the national state of the ethnic

10. Such suspicions point to long-standing political antagonisms between Macedonians and Albanians, emanating from decades of political marginalization of Albanians in Yugoslavia. See Vasiliki Neofotistos, *The Risk of War: Everyday Sociality in the Republic of Macedonia* (Philadelphia, 2012), 15–36. Also see Keith Brown, “In the Realm of the Double-Headed Eagle: Parapolitics in Macedonia, 1994–9,” in Jane K. Cowan, ed., *Macedonia: The Politics of Identity and Difference* (London, 2000): 122–39.

Macedonian people. The 1991 Constitution was amended as a result of the internationally-brokered Ohrid Framework Agreement, which put an official end to the 2001 armed conflict. While the Constitution now refers to “the citizens of the Republic of Macedonia” without making reference to any distinct ethnic groups, the self-proclaimed patriotic associations deny the civic character of the state. The Charter, in addition, designates the Macedonian language as the one and only official language on the entire territory of Macedonia and in the country’s international relations, thus taking issue with the current government’s readiness to discuss making Albanian the second official language throughout the entire territory of Macedonia. Support for VMRO-DPMNE’s positions regarding Macedonian national history surfaced repeatedly in my conversations with association members, and also becomes evident in the Charter of Cooperation where a connection is drawn between the mobilization of patriotic associations in 2017 and the Ilinden uprising against Ottoman rule in 1903. Reference here is made to the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO, or VMRO in Macedonian), the historic paramilitary organization that existed in different forms from the 1890s to the 1930s. The right-wing nationalist VMRO-DPMNE claims to originate from IMRO and continue IMRO’s historical legacy to this day. It is important to note that after the Ilinden uprising IMRO split into two rival factions: one, under Ivan Mihailov, in favor of the incorporation of Macedonia in Bulgaria; the other, under Aleksandar Protogerov, in favor of independence. In 1928, Mihailov’s Bulgaria-based faction assassinated Protogerov, and the organization under Mihailov’s leadership moved to the far right, allying with Mussolini’s Italy and intensely cooperating with the Croatian fascist organization Ustaše in terrorist activities. The organization was disbanded by the Bulgarian army shortly after the coup d’état in Sofia in 1934. IMRO members were purged from the Yugoslav Communist Party, the predecessor of today’s center-left SDSM, due to their past connection with Bulgarian nationalists. In post-independence Macedonia, however, VMRO-DPMNE and its leader Ljupčo Georgievski attempted to rehabilitate IMRO leaders of the interwar period, proclaiming them champions of the rights of Macedonians. As Ulf Brunnbauer explains, these attempts were geared to “construct a historical rightist tradition, which the nationalist VMRO-DPMNE partly could claim for itself, and to oppose the pro-Yugoslav interpretation of Macedonian history, which, politically, was associated with the postcommunist SDSM party.”¹¹

The Production of Patriots

The core belief of each association is that “real patriots” must engage in activities demonstrating patriotic sentiments. To return to the example mentioned above about the storming of the Parliament on April 27, 2017, the police arrested around thirty people in connection with the incident, and the detainees were charged with posing a terrorist threat to the constitutional order and security. Pictures reading “President Ivanov, Absolution for the Patriots” (*Pretsedatele*

11. Ulf Brunnbauer, “Serving the Nation: Historiography in the Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) After Socialism,” *Historein* 4 (2003-4): 161-182, 171-172.

Ivanov, *Abolicija za patriotite*) were shared publicly on the Facebook profiles of members and sympathizers of the associations, referencing a petition submitted by some self-proclaimed patriotic associations to President Ivanov in July 2017. The petition in question described as patriots those who stormed the Parliament to defend the “honor” (*cesta*) and “dignity” (*dostoinstvo*) of the nation against the so-called threat of a new government, eager to negotiate Albanian demands regarding the status of the Albanian language in the country.¹² Patriotism is thus linked to resistance to Albanian demands while the nation emerges as an essentialized idiom in the discourse of newly-emergent civil society actors, underscoring ethnic primacy.

A distinctive feature of these self-proclaimed patriotic associations is that they are named after Ottoman-era revolutionaries who originated from the same areas as the areas where associations are now located, and who fought against Ottoman rule and neighboring states’ expansionist ambitions against Macedonia while disseminating the propaganda of “Macedonia for the Macedonians.”¹³ Some “patriots” claim a direct line of descent from these revolutionaries, many of whom primarily used “terror, targeting civilians and property in Macedonia” to garner support for their cause.¹⁴ The pride of revolutionary ancestry is reflected in the bellicose emblems chosen. Borrowing from the symbolism of the historic paramilitary organization IMRO/VMRO, the associations seek to communicate their ideology and inspire allegiance and devotion. Consider the emblem of the association “Unbowed,” which contains an image of a crossed revolver and dagger over a Bible below the motto “Always for Struga, Always for Macedonia.” The emblem of the association “*Metodija Patce*,” is another case in point. It contains the motto, “Freedom or Death” alongside an intercrossed rifle and a spear, a hand grenade, and a human skull. Both emblems are reminiscent of oaths of loyalty for IMRO/VMRO members. As Keith Brown notes, new members pledged their loyalty to the organization and the country during swearing-in ceremonies, when they often used the phrase “Until Freedom or Death” and recited their oath over a Bible, a revolver, and a dagger.¹⁵

Custom-made, black T-shirts foster among “patriots” a shared sense of community and commitment to that community and its objectives. The T-shirts are emblazoned with the name of the associations, and also the faces of the Ottoman-era revolutionaries after whom the associations are named as a way of evoking defensiveness and organized belligerence. They are worn, often with black berets, in a variety of public settings, including streets, squares,

12. “Доставено барање за аболиција на патриотите кои се обидоа да спречат државен удар на 27 април!” (Delivered Request for the Abolition of the Patriots who Tried to Prevent a Coup on April 27!), at <http://infomax.mk/wp/претседателот-иванов-на-потер-достава> (accessed May 8, 2019).

13. Tchavdar Marinov, “Famous Macedonia, the Land of Alexander: Macedonian Identity at the Crossroads of Greek, Bulgarian and Serbian Nationalism,” in Roumen Daskalov and Tchavdar Marinov, eds., *Entangled Histories of the Balkans, Vol. 1: National Ideologies and Language Policies* (Leiden, 2013), 273–330, 304.

14. Keith Brown, *The Past in Question: Modern Macedonia and the Uncertainties of Nation* (Princeton, 2003), 40. See also Duncan M. Perry, *The Politics of Terror: The Macedonian Liberation Movements 1893-1903* (Durham, 1988), 202-209.

15. *Ibid.*, 260.

and restaurants where association members gather. At the same time, they allow others to identify association members easily.

The right-wing nationalist party VMRO-DPMNE is not in power any more, and Nikola Gruevski, after fleeing to Orban's Hungary to escape a prison sentence for corruption, remains at large. Nonetheless, as of this writing the emphasis on "de-Sorosization" continues, and reveals an obsession in Macedonia—and, more broadly, in east central Europe—with defending ethnonational interests against assumed interlopers. Recently emergent, self-proclaimed patriotic associations have mobilized ideas of combined external and internal threats to national existence as though there were a war frontier. This imagined war frontier marks the dividing line between, on the one hand, belligerent nationalists, who claim that Macedonian sovereignty and national identity are under threat of extinction, and, on the other hand, the Macedonian center-left and liberal (moderate and left-leaning) NGOs, which tend to promote greater inclusiveness in society and are thus assumed to side with "the Albanians." They are also seen as having a direct connection to George Soros. The existential threat allegedly posed by Soros, members of the Macedonian social democratic party, and "the Albanians"—all of whom take a stand against the monoethnic character of the state—have all become intertwined and indistinguishable in recent years. The case study of Macedonia makes clear that we are at a critical juncture in the history of Europe, whereby we see not only the outright public rejection of liberal ideals but also the key role that populist, militant sensibilities play in the formation of new and emerging civil society groups.