



## NATO DEFENSE COLLEGE FOUNDATION

### STRATEGIC TRENDS

May 2015

#### **Balkans**

##### **Behind the clashes in Kumanovo**

On the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> of May 2015 the Divo Naselje neighborhood in the city of Kumanovo (FYROM) was upset by violent clashes between Macedonian police and a group of terrorists. The result was 22 deaths, of which 8 were terrorists and 14 policeman, 34 wounded and 27 arrests.

Kumanovo, the city where on the 9<sup>th</sup> June 1999 NATO and Federal Republic of Yugoslavia signed the agreement which put an end to the Kosovo war, is located in the north of the country, where the Albanian minority (about the 30% of the whole Macedonian population) is concentrated.

Macedonian authorities have affirmed that the assailants were a terrorist group of Albanians, Macedonians and Kosovans citizens that wanted to undermine the government in order to continue the fight for the independence or for the reunion with Albania. Macedonian Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski has said that the attack was conducted by “one of the most dangerous terrorist groups in the Balkans”.

A group of nationalist Albanians fighters, probably linked with UÇK (officially disbanded), is operative in the area of the borders among Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia. This group was responsible for the 2001 insurgency in the north of Macedonia which caused about 1000 total victims, lasted more than 9 months, and ended only with a ceasefire imposed by NATO.

On the other hand, currently are circulating unofficial interpretations supporting the idea that the Kumanovo clash would be connected more with domestic politics rather than with ethnical claims. According to this explanation, Gruevski's conservative governments - in charge since 2006 -facilitated and exploited the battle held in Kumanovo in order to obtain legitimacy and create a diversion. In effect, Gruevski's government has been strongly contested in the last few months due to a corruption, espionage and concealment scandal that caused protests and demonstrations which resulted in clashes with the police in Skopje.

Regardless the true reasons of the fighting, the outlined scenario presents two major unsolved issues: ethnic minorities' status and democracy. The reconciliation with the Albanian minority appears nevertheless impossible without a general stabilization of the area that includes Kosovo too. Beyond the name controversy, Macedonian possibility to join European Union and NATO rely on the solution of these two issues. In fact FYROM joined NATO's Partnership for Peace in 1995 and the Membership Action Plan in 1999 and, in regards to European Union accession, has been a candidate since 2005, but has not yet started negotiations. As a result, the overall integration process in the last ten years was suspended.

Immediately after the Kumanovo facts, NATO Secretary General has expressed great concern and recalled all political leaders to restore calm and transparently and to establish what happened, in order to avoid any further escalation. The Kumanovo fight was indeed the expression of the problems that still remain unsolved in Macedonia and that must be tackled, bearing in mind what happened in 2001, when the crisis slipped out of control.