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TOWARDS INTEGRATION: PROGRESS AND CHALLENGES IN THE BALKANS

SECRETARIAT REPORT*

**OHRID
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International Secretariat

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* This Secretariat Report is presented for information only and does not necessarily represent the official view of the Assembly.

1. Will the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia¹ jeopardise its steady progress towards NATO membership? This was the crucial question at the centre of discussions between NATO PA members, Macedonian political leaders and representatives of the international community gathered in Ohrid for the 57th Rose-Roth seminar, from 25 to 27 September. Macedonian representatives were left in no doubt that the forthcoming referendum on decentralisation could seriously undermine the implementation of the 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement and thereby damage the country's integration in to both NATO and the EU.

2. Some 140 participants, which included diplomats, journalists, academics and regional civil society representatives, were also briefed on the situation in Kosovo by NATO and UN officials, including Norway's Ambassador to NATO Kai Eide, author of a recent study on Kosovo for the UN Secretary General. Ambassador Eide stressed the urgency of developing a strategy that offered a political perspective and hope for the future. He suggested that the 'standards before status' approach was now "untenable in its present form". It should now be 'standards before and after status' coupled to a more political, less bureaucratic strategy and the transfer of competences and responsibilities to local leaders including the minorities.

3. The positive developments in South East Europe in general, and in Macedonia in particular were highlighted by most participants, who tended to agree that "outside Kosovo, no part of the Balkans has a serious capacity to jeopardize the regional or continental security", as analyst Marcus Tanner stressed in his opening remarks.

4. The unresolved status of Kosovo, however, was a worrying and recurring topic throughout the seminar. Alastair Mathewson from the UN mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) described the interrelated nature of the challenges. There is widespread frustration in Kosovo over the inability to arrive at a final status for the region and the lack of jobs. The provisional government has taken on some authority over local issues although the UN retains control over aspects such as foreign affairs and defence. Mr Mathewson said that there should be more transfer of competencies to the provisional authorities, but only as standards for ensuring a multi-ethnic society are implemented.

5. He also stressed that the economy is in dire condition. Remittances which had long since supported the region are diminishing. Unemployment is running at 60 percent. There is no foreign investment and organized crime and trafficking are rampant. Many in Kosovo are expecting that their previous positions at defunct enterprises will somehow reappear, and do not want to look to other employment options such as agriculture. In fact, Albanians are coming to Kosovo specifically to work in the harvest season because of the unwillingness of unemployed Kososvo residents to work in that sector.

6. Many contributors stressed the need for a new strategy, in which, according to Ambassador Eide, "standards implementation takes Kosovo in an orderly way from the present through future status discussions and into a wider regional and European integration process". Such a strategy could entail a new division of labour among the different international organisations, with a diminishing role for the UN and a more proactive role for the EU. With the end of resolution 1244, many participants agreed, Kosovo will probably be governed from Pristina, with the EU assuming the international lead role. With respect to status, Ambassador Eide outlined several principles: no partition and a respect for existing borders; no ethnic dividing lines; no line of authority from Belgrade; and government from Pristina with the European Union in the leading international role.

7. The Alliance would still be crucial in providing security in Kosovo and KFOR Commander Lieutenant General Yves de Kermabon indicated that NATO troops will continue to adapt their

¹ Turkey recognises the Republic of Macedonia with its constitutional name

deployment in Kosovo with an emphasis on flexibility and mobility. In 2005, he said, KFOR will gradually move "to a task force concept dedicated to Kosovo-wide interventions". General de Kermabon also stressed that they were learning the lessons of the March ethnic clashes. At the start of the violence, KFOR stayed in its barracks and relied on the local authorities to control the situation, but now KFOR is working on riot control and will be prepared to stop another outbreak. They also realized that they need better intelligence to avoid being surprised by outbursts of ethnic violence in the future. This means building better contacts with the local population and working to build up the local police and security capability.

8. Ambassador Eide emphasized that we should stop following a policy of maintaining an uncomfortable status quo and actually take steps to resolve the outstanding issues. He noted a willingness in Belgrade to be more cooperative in the process and this was primarily due to pressure from Brussels and the desire of Belgrade to move towards integration into the EU. He also warned against the 'standards before status' arrangement that was in danger of turning a political process into a bureaucratic process. He stressed that there is no good time to deal with the final status of Kosovo, but that it must be done and sooner is better than later. The presence of the international community declines year by year and it is important to settle the issue while there is still a strong international presence. He also noted that the UN Special Representative has a lot of power to dismiss corrupt officials and otherwise take more control, but has not done so. It may be necessary to exercise that power to break the cycle of corruption and instil a sense of accountability in local officials.

9. Macedonian representatives consistently stressed their desire to integrate their country into the EU and NATO. The concept has very high popular support and as much as 70 percent of the population supports joining NATO and the EU. International community representatives agreed that Macedonia had made considerable progress in its path toward membership of NATO and also to the European Union. "A mere three years after an armed ethnic conflict", said EU Special Representative Ambassador Michael Sahlin, the country has "become an example in the Western Balkans and showed that ethnic communities can live peacefully together". As a mark of Macedonian progress towards EU membership, it was noted that Commission President, Romano Prodi was due to arrive shortly in Skopje with the Commission questionnaire: the first step towards Accession talks.

10. Macedonia has made progress in several areas including defence reform. Both Minister of Defence Vlado Buchkovski and NATO Senior Military Representative Dennis Blease noted the changes in the country's armed forces. NATO has linked reform to other areas and has a close relationship with the foreign ministry. Transformation is being aided by an exchange of best practices with NATO members and Macedonia is now at the third and final stage of its transformation process. One major change is the rapid downsizing of the military that Macedonia has undertaken, reducing the size of the standing armed forces from approximately 14,000 to under 8,000. Some personnel have been transferred to the border police, which is gradually taking over control of the borders from the military. Macedonia is concentrating on its special forces as a niche capability contribution to the Alliance, and is already contributing to missions in Iraq and Afghanistan where they have sent a total of 100 troops.

11. The creation of the Adriatic Charter by Macedonia, Albania and Croatia, in which the three countries pursue their goal of NATO membership together was also cited by several speakers as a positive development. A willingness to play a constructive regional role by influencing and helping neighbours would be seen by NATO members as an important contribution to Alliance security.

12. However, various participants also stressed the domestic challenges that Macedonia faces, notably in the areas of economic growth and the establishment of the rule of law. Structural reforms and foreign as well as domestic investment are needed to reduce the 35% unemployment rate and the wide trade deficit. A reform of the judiciary system appears crucial to allow the

government to continue its efforts in fighting organised crime, including human and drug trafficking and money laundering. Many of those challenges are related and require regional solutions. Organized crime, for example, was cited as a major drain on small and medium sized business and therefore a serious impairment to job creation. But organized crime is a regional problem that transcends the new borders in the Balkans and must be addressed in a coordinated manner between the various Balkan states.

13. But the most serious challenge to Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations appears to be the referendum scheduled for November 7 which would effectively reinstate the 1996 municipal arrangements. If the referendum is approved, it would effectively obstruct the implementation of the Ohrid Agreement reforms and jeopardise inter-ethnic relations. Brigadier General Blease, NATO military representative in Skopje, clearly expressed the concerns of all the international community by stating that "if the Framework Agreement is not fully implemented, this country cannot expect to receive an invitation to join NATO within the next few years". This clear message was reiterated by both Ambassador Sahlin and US Ambassador Lawrence Butler. A successful referendum, according to the US diplomat, will in fact reverse all Macedonia's progress "offering a very uncertain future".
