

# Russia's Intervention Was Crucial in Balkans

by Umberto Pascali

"In the first phase of the aggression, the Kosovo Liberation Army's puppetmasters lost," a Macedonian source told *EIR* on March 30. "But here nobody has any illusion that they will not attack again." At that moment, the Macedonian Army had apparently succeeded in doing what many major think-tanks in the West had said was impossible: It had ejected the KLA gangs, not only from the hills around the city of Tetovo—where they had taken positions targeting civilians with mortar shells—but out of the country. This was achieved without a single casualty. Had the Macedonian Army not been capable, as most said it was not, of repelling the aggression, Macedonia, as a sovereign country, would have been finished.

Still on March 27, one of the most revered Balkans "experts" in Washington, former National Security Council official Ivo Daalder, now of the Brookings Institution, was able to tell an audience that "the worst that you can do is to let an ineffective Macedonian military try to take care of an insurgency through means that, almost by definition, will make matters worse rather than better." The second speaker at the Brookings press briefing on "Macedonia: The Next Balkans War?" was a military expert, Michael O'Hanlon, who claimed that "only NATO" could take care of the problem. "I don't think Macedonia's military is realistically going to be capable of a serious counterinsurgency operation," he said. "The counterinsurgency doctrine tends to say you really need five times to ten times as many troops as you have rebels if you want to win, because counterinsurgency—as we learned in Vietnam and as the Serbs learned in Kosovo, and the Soviets in Afghanistan—this is not the kind of war that you win by delivering a lot of ordnance into a forest or a countryside."

What appeared absurd in this argumentation, is the fact that the NATO that was expected to go from Kosovo to Macedonia, take over the country, and engage in counterinsurgency warfare, was the same NATO that had claimed it was unable to stop the KLA from crossing the border from Kosovo into Macedonia! There are 40,000 NATO troops in Kosovo (the KFOR), and yet the KLA was able to cross into Macedonia and then back, without being disturbed. NATO reports that hundreds of men, claiming to be members of the National Liberation Army (the name that the KLA uses in Macedonia) arrived at the Kosovo border from Macedonia, after the Macedonian Army offensive, and went through the NATO check-

point. Only 18 were momentarily detained, because they were carrying weapons.

## Putin Steps In

According to Macedonian sources, the dangerous paralysis on NATO's part was broken thanks to the intervention of Russian President Vladimir Putin. When Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov visited the Macedonian capital of Skopje on March 21, he brought a clear message from Putin. Macedonia could not really count on the verbal assurances coming from all the international institutions. Nobody in fact would move a finger, and Macedonia was almost certain to be de facto partitioned into two "ethnic areas." At that point, the international organizations would intervene to institutionalize the division of the country.

Ivanov brought an alternative: a Russian proposal for an agreement among the countries of the Balkans region based on respect for the existing borders, and the national sovereignty of the countries. During the same mission, Minister Ivanov delivered a letter from Putin to Yugoslav President Vojislav Kostunica, because southern Serbia had been attacked by the KLA as well. In the letter, the Russian President stated that "decisive political actions—and, if necessary, the use of force—can avert a wider Balkan war." Russia, he wrote, was ready to join Europe and the United States "in diplomatic, and possibly military efforts." If not stopped, Putin stressed, the KLA attack could easily "spill over into the rest of the Balkan Peninsula."

And in the middle of the attack, Macedonia received from Ukraine, two Russian-made MI-24 helicopter gunships. The two helicopters turned out to be invaluable in the defeat of the KLA gangs, which, dug in in the hills around Tetovo, had created a "Sarajevo siege"-type situation.

On March 23, Putin met Macedonian President Boris Trajkovski at the summit of the European Union heads of state in Stockholm. Such a meeting was considered crucial in Skopje. Putin took the microphone to explain that the KLA had to be faced "in a robust manner." He explicitly compared their attack on Macedonia with the situation in Chechnya. When, in 1996, Russia withdrew from Chechnya, he said, the terrorists attacked Dagestan. "Had we not taken adequate measures of reaction, we would have faced much wider problems these days." If unchecked, the KLA terrorism "will create the conditions for shaking Europe in its very heart."

A Macedonian source told *EIR* that the Macedonians have "grown up." They understand that they cannot expect much from the West. It is the whole international situation that has to be changed. "Can small Macedonia change the international situation? Because this is our only chance. Maybe, if Putin gets the support, even the silent support, of some European countries concerning the Balkan situation. . . . If we will be able to defend our sovereignty, then we could really have a chance; we could help trigger a major international change," he said.