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Dot-Com Antagonisms? :
The Macedonian Question on the Web

Introduction

Tracing and classifying things Macedonian on the Internet is by no means an easy task. The Macedonian Question's reflections alone constitute a particularly challenging research subject too. The abundance of web resources is directly dependent on the vast array of issues comprised under the above rubric [1], as well as the number of divergent or even frontally colliding positions involved. Additionally, the piling of megabytes proceeds from another fact that deserves acknowledgement. The emergence of the Republic of Macedonia following the disintegration of the Yugoslav federation in the early 1990s, which exacerbated some old disputes over history and identity, roughly coincided with the mass spread of the computer-mediated communications (CMC). In a sense, all controversies surrounding the new state's path to independence and recognition have had their projections in the cyberspace, and, vice versa, a great percentage of the related to Macedonia is often, implicitly or explicitly, linked with those controversies. As a consequence, the websites on Macedonia and the Macedonian Question have been mushrooming.

To my best knowledge, this realm of has not been charted. Nevertheless, it provides those willing to navigate it with some valuable material. As quality and quantity are not necessarily synonymous, its value does not lie in the richness of resources or the fact that they are helpful for historians and social scientists; it stems from two other attributes. Firstly, the reflections of the Macedonian Question on the Web illustrate the popular attitudes and beliefs that underlie what has been more visible as a conflict between nation-states and political or academic elites. Absolutely unregulated, yet relatively accessible, the Internet supplies the perfect means for direct encounters with the opponent and his/ her views. Communication is easy and straightforward, unmediated and ungoverned by any third party. [2] The medium's unofficial and decentralised character

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[1] On the meaning of the term 'Macedonian Question' and its phases see James Pettifer, *The New Macedonian Question*, International Affairs (London), 68 (3), 1992, reprinted in *The New Macedonian Question* (Basingstoke : Macmillan, 1999), pp. 15 –27 (hereafter, *The New Macedonian Question*). See also Victor Roudometof (ed.), *The Macedonian Question: Culture, Historiography, Politics* (Boulder CO: East European Monographs; New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2000).

[2] In the words of Neil Barrett, 'The Internet is perhaps the ultimate, large scale expression of anarchy … in the sense of a society that is not governed by a central authority; more, a society that functions without the requirement for a central governing body'. ,Neil Barett, *The State of the Cybernation: Cultural, Political and Economic Implications of the Internet* (London: Kogan Page, 1996), p. 12.

results in one's comparative freedom of expression and interpretation, and in one's (at least theoretically) unlimited possibility to relay his or her views and ideas. This has to be contrasted with the models of social communication that state-sanctioned and state-expounded nationalisms are reliant on. Engaged in supplying standardised explanations and views, the latter are and are hugely dependent on their ability to curb the incoherent or contradicting information. That brings along the second important features that underlies the relationship between CMC and the controversies over Macedonia. It is obvious that the Internet's interactivity, together with its nature of a highly informal environment, impacts the conduct and outcome of debates, controversies, or conflicts referred to as Macedonian Question.[3] In this paper, I argue that although on the surface freer communication entails exacerbating tensions and reaffirming dividing lines, the overall role played by the Web has been a beneficial one due to the aforementioned factor.

Analyzing the impact of CMC technology on the disputes over Macedonianness, this paper and looks at two types of sources. First, it is interested in the websites dealing with different aspects of Macedonian history, politics and identity. Second, it pays special attention to the Web's interactive features that enable the users to exchange views and ideas through direct communication. Those include Usenet groups (newsgroups) [4], Internet discussion forums [5], and mailing lists. Initially, it presents an account of the type of pages that have been accumulated to this day, and extrapolates the major themes and patterns detectable therein. Then it proceeds to describe the basic traits of the interactive Web spaces where direct communication occurs. Doing that, it tries to retrieve the main characteristics of the average user regularly visiting the sites and routinely participating in the Internet debates on Macedonia. In doing that, the paper makes use of a series of queries filled in by such individuals.

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[3] For a number of reasons, the present ongoing conflict between the Republic of Macedonia and the Albanian guerillas of the NLA along with its online reflections are generally excluded from the present analysis.

[4] Most popular are alt.news.macedonia , soc.culture.macedonia , soc.culture.bulgaria etc.

[5] http://forums.big-blue.net/cgi-bin/wwwthreads/wwwthreads.pl

http://www.ravelly.com/members/macedonia/index.php , http://network54.com/Forum/64646 http://clubs.dir.bg/postlist.php?Cat=7&Board=maked , http://members.boardhost.com/Bulgaria . All quoted URLs were active at the time, when the present conference paper was submitted (June 2001).

Competing for Macedonia.com

An important element of the overall Macedonian Question, the conflict over the legitimate use of the name Macedonia, in which the newly independent Republic of Macedonia confronted Greece, has been comprehensively reflected on the Internet. The Panmacedonian Network was the first group, which was quick enough to perceive the importance of domain names as a means of reaffirming one's ideas and positions. This entity, bringing together emigrants from Greek (Aegean) Macedonia with Greek national consciousness, established itself under the web address www.macedonia.com as early as 1995. The page contains sections on the history, culture and geography of Greek (Aegean) Macedonia and propagates the viewpoint that Macedonia, or at least the southern half of the geographic perimeter known by that name, is a perennial Greek territory. [6] What sums up nicely its main point is the inevitable '4000 Years of Greek Civilization' that has been the common refrain since the Macedonian-Greek tensions reached a climax in the beginning of the 1990s.[7]   Importantly, that particular page is a good example, which helps greatly in understanding one of the ways the Macedonian Question is translated into cyberspace. The very acquisition of the domain name 'Macedonia' is perceived an act whereby legitimacy is preserved and sovereignty over meaning reasserted. Obtaining the control over *Macedonia.com*, the Greek organization defines and protects the 'right' connotations of the historical and geographical term 'Macedonia' by associating the name with the proper meaning it should communicate.

Given that particular significance of domain-name acquisitions, it is quite logical that individuals and groups originating from the Republic of Macedonia or generally adhering to the cause of Macedonian nationalism have attempted to 'remedy' the unfavorable condition of being deprived of *Macedonia.com*. The closest approximation to the coveted web address was naturally found in www.macedonia.org (along with the respective German and French versions www.mazedonien.org and www.macedoine.org). Even before Macedonia.org was set, the page *Virtual Macedonia* (www.vmacedonia.com

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[6] http://www.macedonia.com/english/history/review/ .

[7] For a standard Greek position on the dispute the book written by the former Minister of Northern Greece, Nikolaos Martis, *Falsification of the Macedonian History* (4th edn., Athens : A.S. Onassis Public Benefit Foundation, 1989). Online version: http://www.hri.org/Martis/ .

) , which is apparently another second-best solution of the Macedonia.com dilemma, for a period of time enjoyed nearly the status of the country's official website. Similarly, another page emerged at www.rmacedonia.com (i.e. Republic of Macedonia). To complete the spectrum, the Macedonian Patriotic Organization (MPO), whose members are many second and third generation Macedonian emigrants espousing a Macedono-Bulgarian identity, established its online presence at www.macedonian.org .[8]

Something similar has occurred in respect to the domains containing the VMRO abbreviation. The history of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (VMRO, *Vutreshna Makedonska Revoljucionna Organizacija*) that has been amongst the focal points in the conflict between the historiographies in Bulgaria and Yugoslavia (later in independent Macedonia) naturally resulted in a contest over who controls that sequence of four letters in the Internet. Here groups coming from Bulgaria have had an upper hand. The Sofia-based VMRO (formerly VMRO-Union of Macedonian Societies) opened its website at www.vmro.org in 1998, and two years later its Youth Organization acquired www.vmro.net. Meanwhile, a Macedonian group based in Sweden built www.vmro-mnm.com (VMRO-Makedonija na Makedoncite, VMRO- Macedonia to the Macedonians). The national domains (.mk and .bg) were distributed accordingly amongst VMRO-DPMNE (www.vmro-dpmne.org.mk) , the VMRO-VMRO party [9] (www.vmro.org.mk) , and the Bulgarian VMRO (www.vmro.bg).[10]

Regardless of the perspective they advocate, there are a number of features observable in all websites dealing with Macedonian history and identity.[11] First, they contain primarily

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[8] One can add to this series the pages www.makedonija.com and http://www.makedonia.com/ , but it is important to mention that as in the case of *vmacedonia* and *rmacedonia* these are mainly portal sites aimed at providing broad information about the Republic of Macedonia, and not just at engaging in the discussions over the past. The UK domains have been equally distributed between the Macedonian Cultural Centre (R Macedonia) owning www.macedonia.co.uk , and Macedonian Society of Great Britain (Greek) – www.macedonia.org.uk .

[9] VMRO-Vistinska makedonska reformska opcija, (VMRO –True Macedonian Reform Option) a breakaway group from the ruling VMRO-DPMNE, chaired by the former minister in DPMNE's government Boris Stojmenov.

[10] Although the name www.vmro.com was reserved by a Canadian company, which until recently raised some suspicions that the émigré communities in the country were involved, no site on Macedonia has been built there. The domain is used by a commercial webpage.

[11] Among the best examples are *Notes on Macedonian History* (Macedonian) http://eon.pmf.ukim.edu.mk/~filip/macedonia/history/) , *Macedonia for the Macedonians* (http://www.geocities.com/~makedonija) , *Macedonian Oracle* (pro-Bulgarian, http://makedon.mtx.net)

hypertext documents in English. That is perhaps not unusual due to the fact that English is part and parcel of the overall CMC revolution and, indeed, the globalization phenomenon. Yet there is something deserving special attention. It pertains to the users that those sites normally target. One must never forget that the Macedonia Question, or, to be more elaborate, the controversies over the history and ethno-national loyalty of the Slavic inhabitants of geographic Macedonia, has been in the past and has very much remained an obscure issue for many of its outside observers, arguably, for the great majority of them. In fact, the 'outsiders' are precisely the target groups, toward whom the message in these pages is directed. This is exemplified not just by the wide use of English (sometimes other Western languages too), but by the nature of the materials that are found in these sites. Very often, they contain brief documents of introductory character, devised to present the respective argument as plainly and succinctly as possible. [12] For the greatest part, the pages in question either sketch particular narratives as sanctioned by national historiographies [13] or supply collections of brief English language publications and materials supporting the main assertions. [14] Quite rarely, one is able to find websites that offer larger papers or documents, whether in English or in the original language, which might be of interest for people with sufficient background in Balkan or Macedonian history and politics. A favorite technique for presenting the information is the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) format, whose principal virtues are again succinctness and operability. [15] The conclusion to be drawn is that the primary purpose of these web pages is promoting arguments within the context of the Macedonian controversies. That is undertaken mainly in order to impact the opinion of users who are outside the core adherents of this or that interpretation and who presumably do not belong to the Balkan nations involved in the dispute. [16]

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[12] Consider the following text on Bill Nicholov's *Macedonia for the Macedonians* starting page, which is quite typical:
' The situation in which Macedonia finds itself today can be traced back to the Balkan Wars of 1912-13. As a result of the Treaty of Bucharest, Macedonia was partitioned among Serbia, Greece, and Bulgaria. These regions are known as the Republic of Macedonia (independent since 1991), Aegean Macedonia (occupied by Greece since 1913), and Pirin Macedonia (occupied by Bulgaria since 1913). There is also a small part of Macedonia presently in Albania (known as Mala Prespa).', http://www.geocities.com/~makedonija/ .

[13] http://www.macedonia.com/english/history/review/ ,http://www.bulgariaonline.bg/macedonia/index.html .

[14] http://faq.macedonia.org/history/ .

[15] http://www.abest.com/~angelos/macfaq.html (Greek) , http://faq.macedonia.org/ (Macedonian).

[16] Other good examples are *Macedonian Oracle* (Bulgarian) , http://makedon.mtx.net), *Notes on Macedonia History* (Macedonian), http://eon.pmf.ukim.edu.mk/~filip/macedonia/history/ .

Clearly, the above observations are coherent with the widespread belief of the many people in the region that the fate of Macedonia, possibly of Southeast Europe as a whole, is largely dependent on the role played by the West. Often shaping the outcomes of the local political developments, the international factor is seen as an arbitrating authority for the rival claims. This emphasis on third party involvement and the efforts to impact the attitudes of external actors for the purposes of obtaining a favorable judgment is indeed a phenomenon of long standing in Balkan history. A monograph written by the Bulgarian historian Ivan Ilchev analyses the modes in which competing nationalisms in the region pursued similar objectives in the classical period of national conflicts between the Greek Uprising and the Lausanne Peace Conference (1821-1923). [17] It studies the strategies, which states and national movements developed to impact the Western public opinion and gain the local elites' support for the respective cause. Certainly, the Macedonian Question, in its classical reincarnation, is amongst the highlights of the book. Using Ilchev's work along with its main themes as some sort of yardstick, one can see that many of the aforementioned patterns underlying the message structure of the polemical pages on Macedonia differ little from the ones encountered in the propaganda media of earlier times. As in the case of the old 'hard–copy' campaigns, the Internet appears as a 'mass medium for influencing public opinion and public policy'.[18] However, there are numerous differences of crucial significance. What is important to notice is the relatively low cost of setting and maintaining an Internet page as compared to the costs associated with producing and disseminating printed material (newspapers, books, brochures, maps etc). The Web offers substantial opportunities for promoting one's views, which turns it into a powerful political tool. This proposition's veracity is becoming even more obvious within advanced societies where the use of the Internet is already common and the users' numbers of grow rapidly.

On the other hand, it is easy to see that the spread of CMC technology has some consequences, which inhibit the efficiency of the propaganda message. To a large extent,

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[17] Ivan Ilchev, *Rodinata mi, prava ili ne!: vunshnopoliticheska propaganda na balkanskite strani*, *1821-1923* , [My Country Right or Wrong! : Balkan States' Foreign Political Propaganda, 1821 – 1923] (Sofiia : Universitetsko izd-vo 'Sv. Kliment Okhridski', 1995).
[18] Michael Margolis, *Politics as Usual : the Cyberspace 'Revolution'* (Thousand Oaks, CA and London : Sage, 2000), p. 20.

the Web fosters a plurality of positions. Equally accessible to users of different convictions, online publishing and campaigning aimed at acquiring control over an issue and securing unchallengeable legitimacy proves to be a rather futile exercise. Ultimately, the unbiased, unknowledgeable, English- speaking inhabitant of the West, who is supposedly the recipient of the statement enjoys the chance to review the full range of stances and access pages propounding all conflicting claims. At the end of the day, the pursuit of Macedonia.com is a competition of no winners and losers. The domain-name race has more symbolic then practical ramifications. Ironically, it is quite possible that the chief consumers of the information supplied by those pages are the online activists, and not the 'outsiders'.

The Rival Parties

Nowadays the Internet abounds with pages representing the diverging interpretations of Macedonian history at large, that is to say the past of the geographic region of Macedonia.[19] Probably the greatest number of the websites one comes across result from the efforts of people embracing the views of radical Macedonian nationalism. The so-called Ancient Macedonians (*Antichki Makedonci*) who advocate the idea of continuity between the modern Macedonian nation and Ancient Macedon of Philip and Alexander the Great, form the biggest and most prominent group within all users who express some interest or are involved in some way in publishing on or discussing the Macedonian issues on the Internet.[20] As early as 1997, their main sites were launched including the Web version of ultra-nationalist weekly *Makedonsko Sonce* (*Macedonian Sun*) [21] together with the online journal *Makedonika* [22], both run by Slavko Mangovski, himself a regular participant in the Usenet discussion groups and the web forums. The Ancients' ideology, finding its paramount expression in those sources, combines certain traits common for all

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[19] For a brief, yet very knowledgeable, overview and assessment of the main interpretations, see Kyril Drezov, 'Macedonian Identity: Overview of the Major Claims' In: James Pettifer, *The New Macedonian Question*, pp. 47 – 60.

[20] A nice example of this group's views are articles with titles such as 'Drevno Makedonskiot Jazik – Osnova na sovremeniot makedonski jazik i site takanarecheni slovenski jazici' ('The Ancient Macedonian Language – Fundament of the Contemporary Macedonian Language and All So-Called (sic!) Slavonic Languages') http://www.makedonskosonce.com/sonce175/tekst1_va/vasilil.htm .

[21] http://www.makedonskosonce.com .

[22] http://www.makedonika.com/ . Other sites include http://www.macedon.org/ , http://www.unitedmacedonians.org/ , http://www.vmro-mnm.com . For a general index of all pages concerning the general debate between Greek and Modern Macedonian nationalists over the heritage of Alexander the Great refer to http://www.isidore-of-seville.com/alexander/13.html .

Balkan nationalisms (the cult of the past, the myths of continuous and unbroken tradition of resistance to foreign domination and struggle for national emancipation etc.) with overtly racist elements. In the vocabulary of the *Antichki* the Greeks are simply referred to as 'athenians' (rarely rendered with a capital a) and their country as 'The Former Turkish Colony of Greece' (FTCOG closely following the logic of the FYROM abbreviation)[23], while the Bulgarian nation is conceived as a 'turko-tatar' construct of doubtful future or just a fictitious entity.

The rise of the Ancients has been a development to which the progress of CMC technology contributed considerably. It is by no means a minor detail that one of their principal figures, the self-styled historian from Shtip Alexandar Donski, was able to gain publicity and promote his works through the Internet, as well as the fact that he, just like Slavko Mangovski, became active in the discussions in the virtual space. [24] There is an important reason for that significant part played by the Internet. Apart from conveying particular information targeted at impartial users, it has been instrumental for mobilizing human resources and promoting political action within communities already sharing particular identities or interests (e.g. the post-1940s Macedonian emigrants to Canada and Australia). This phenomenon, which is becoming more pronounced nowadays [25], was already evident some years ago. The Ancients were at the forefront in the diaspora campaign for Macedonia's international recognition and they are the first to have used extensively the Internet to that end. [26] Living in countries like Australia or Canada, they were among the first to enjoy the benefits of CMC, to establish their presence in the Internet and use it as a campaign instrument. Added to their nationalist fervor, this explains the Ancients central position within the virtual Macedonian realm.

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[23] Importantly, the FTCOG is an acronym invented in the virtual space.

[24] For a brief biographical file containing some publications, see http://www.gate.net/~mango/Donski.htm . By far the most famous book, written by Donski, is *Etnogenetskite Razliki pomegju Bugarite i Makedoncite* [The Ethnogenetic Differences between Bulgarians and Macedonians], (Skopje, 2000) which has been widely distributed via the Internet.

[25] Consider the example of the current conflict between Macedonia's government and the forces of the Albanian NLA, which has been reflected in many websites http://www.ok.mk/ , http://www.alb-net.com/amcc/ , http://www.org.mk/tetovo/index.html , http://www.balkanreport.com/ etc.

[26] For a comprehensive account of the conflict and the role played by the diaspora communities, see Loring Danforth, *The Macedonian Conflict: Ethnic Nationalism in a Transnational World,* (Princeton ; Chichester : Princeton University Press, 1995). Victor Bivell , (ed.) *Macedonian Agenda,* (Five Dock NSW: Pollitecon Publications, Australia, 1995).
Useful websites include http://www.mhrmc.on.ca/ (Macedonian Human Rights Movement of Canada), http://www.biserbalkanski.com (Canadian Macedonian Internet Community).

The Ancients' websites should be added to (and contrasted with) another group of pages, which represent a milder or more mainstream version of Macedonian nationalism. In most cases, their purpose is not primarily related to the polemics over Macedonia's history, but it is to be sought in their desire to provide information on of the country as a whole. The sections on Macedonian history, culture and language usually contain materials taken directly from the history textbooks or publications on Macedonian history by established scholars written in the Yugoslav period and the 1990s.[27] Insofar as those sites deal with questions of history and identity, the general theme is again the affirmation of Macedonian nation's distinctiveness through the centuries as well as the idea that, having evolved thanks to a sufficiently long historical process, it is not just a product of historical contingencies as claimed by Greek or Bulgarian academics and politicians.[28] Although one can hardly associate those pages with a group of users as clearly identifiable as, for example, the Bulgarian group or the Ancients, they form an essential part of the resources available on Macedonia in the Internet.

Another portion of the Internet resources on Macedonia's history and ethnopolitics is linked with the Bulgarian perspective. The general point raised by these type of sites is that the history of all Macedonian Slavs, at least up to the establishment of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia in 1944-45, is an integral part of Bulgarian national history. The topics of interest cover mostly the period of National Revival in the XIX century along with the armed struggles against the Ottoman, Serbian and Greek domination in Macedonia.[29] The contemporary Macedonian nation is treated as an outcome of nation-building activities sponsored by Tito's Yugoslavia.[30] A special effort is put on demythologizing the partisan movement in Vardar Macedonia in the years

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[27] In the case of http://faq.macedonia.org/history/ , for instance, these are articles and excerpts from books by Ivan Katardzhiev, Blazhe Ristovski, the Council for Research into South-Eastern Europe of the Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts etc. Other sites include *Macedonia Yesterday and Today* (online version of a book written by Jovan and Mishel Pavlovski) http://www.unet.com.mk/mian/online.htm .

[28] For an English resume of Macedonian historiography's standardised positions, see Blaze (Blazhe) Ristovski , *Macedonia and the Macedonian People* (Vienna: SIMAG Holding, 1999).

[29] http://makedon.mtx.net/ , http://www.bulgariaonline.bg/macedonia/ , http://imro.hit.bg/leftmenu-docs_ab_past.htm , http://www.macedoniainfo.com (maintained by the Macedonian Scientific Institute – Sofia).

[30] 'Macedonian Events 1940-1950', http://makedon.mtx.net/m4_0.htm , 'The Change of Family Names' ,http://makedon.mtx.net/r_name.htm .

1941-1944. [31] There are a number of important projects undertaken by Bulgarian Internet propagandists such as the site *Macedonian Library* – a vast collection of hypertext books and articles from a broad range of authors – Macedonian revolutionaries (Pavel Shatev, Dr Hristo Tatarchev, Hristo Siljanov etc.), Western journalists (Henri Pozzi, Albert Sonnichsen), academics (both Western and Bulgarian) and some contemporary Macedonian authors expressing views, which are critical of the mainstream historiography in their country (Mladen Srbinovski, Alexandar Bonev, Dimitar Galev).[32] Another highlight in the Bulgarian web resources has been a large site dedicated to Todor Alexandrov, IMRO's leader in the period 1911-1924.[33] As in the case of the Ancients, a network of people has emerged that is devoted to publishing and carrying out discussions on the Web. A major part of the websites is a result of the joint efforts of groups of users.[34] Therefore, the Internet has been instrumental for their evolution into a virtual community with its own physiognomy.

The third group that has a visible presence on the Web is of Greek provenance. Besides the Panmacedonian Network, there are a number of sites that uphold positions, akin to the ones asserted by the Greek historiography on Macedonia.[35] Importantly, a sufficient amount of web resources are derived from the works of Greek scholars and publicists, working in academic units such as the Salonica-based *Society of Macedonian Studies*[36] and the *Institute of Balkan Studies* (IMHA). [37] The most Greek pages are of an accentuatedly argumentative character. The discussed topics are the history and ethnicity

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[31] See the online version of Nikola Petrov, *Koi bea partizanite vo Makedonija* [Who Were the Partisans in Macedonia?] (Skopje 1998), http://members.nbci.com/knigi/partiz.html , On the events of 11 October 1941, http://makedon.mtx.net/r_11oct.htm .

[32] Macedonian Library http://members.nbci.com/knigi , Books in English http://members.nbci.com/_XMCM/knigi_en/index.html .

[33] http://www.todoralexandrov.com .

[34] e.g. *Macedonian Library.*

[35] *The Falsification of Macedonian History*, http://makedonia.cc.ece.ntua.gr ,

A Very Brief History of Macedonia, http://www.abest.com/~angelos/history.html .

Macedonia in History, http://www.anemos.com/Diaspora/macedonia/Introduction_To_Macedonia.html , http://www.anemos.com/Diaspora/macedonia/Macedonia_Index.html ,

Macedonia through the Ages, http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Senate/9443/) ,

Macedonia: History and Politics, http://www.eigenmedia.com/pelopon/macedonia/macedon_h.html ,

The Panmacedonian Organization of California, http://www.macedonianpark.com .

[36] http://www.hyper.gr/ems/ .

[37] http://www2.hyper.gr/imxa/ , Other sites maintained by Greek academic institutions include *Macedonia: The historical Profile of Northern Greece*, http://vergina.eng.auth.gr/macedonia/index.html and http://www.lib.auth.gr/history/macedonian.htm (a collection of articles), both hosted on the server of the Aristoteleian University of Thessaloniki .

Ancient Macedonians, the Byzantine Period, as well as the region's history during the era of national upheavals (XIX and early XX centuries). Their purpose is to counter the claims coming from the Republic of Macedonia and calling into question Greece's title to the area, known as Aegean Macedonia. They do that by stressing the continuous presence of Hellenism in those territories as well as other localities lying beyond the present borders of the Greek state. As in the case of the Bulgarian pages, the tendency in Greek sites is towards a transition from relatively small pages of straightforward polemical nature to more comprehensive projects providing online access to various publications on Macedonia's history, ethnography and culture. A good example for that trend is the website Macedonian Heritage (www.macedonian-heritage.gr) , which contains a number of papers by authors like Kondis, Gounaris and Kofos as well as certain valuable historical documents.[38] In addition to online publishing, the Greek users have, by the present moment, established networks of users along the lines of the Macedonian issue, parallel to the ones set by other groups.

The one-time Serbian claims on the Macedonian Slavs' identity have been reflected quite rudimentarily on the Web. The single serious effort to-date, which is known to me, is a page entitled *Old Serbia* [39] designed and maintained by the Skopje resident Igor Malinovski, another regular participant in the Internet discussions (http://starasrbija.cjb.net). It reproduces the arguments of Serbian statesmen and academics from the time preceding the emergence of Socialist Yugoslavia, heavily focusing on Serbian domination in Macedonia in the XIV century.

Confrontation or Dialogue? :
Communicating through the Internet

Compared to the above websites, the great majority of which hardly amount to anything more than sets of partial claims, assertions about historical 'truths' and attempts to reinforce essentialised identities, it is the interactive character of the Internet which poses the most interesting questions about the impact of the CMC on the Macedonian controversies. Web pages often come short of achieving the result they seek, namely

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[38]See for example http://www.macedonian-heritage.gr/events.html , a set of diplomatic correspondence in connection with the Ilinden uprising.
[39] Old Serbia – the name used by Serbian nationalists to denote the territories of Sandjak, Kosovo and Northern Macedonia, the core of Tsar Stefan Dushan's empire of the mid 14th century.

shaping the attitudes and perceptions of users not belonging to the core of activists or generally those not subscribing to the respective national perspective. In turn, web formats that involve direct exchange of information have the greatest potential to impact the 'us-them' equilibrium, hence, the conceptualization of Macedonianness in general. There is a simple reason underlying that extraordinary capacity of the Internet. All nationalist ideologies are immensely dependent on the clear-cut articulation of otherness. The threatening other is always present in the collective imagination as a ferment promoting greater cohesiveness, and therefore, this presence is constantly evoked in various socio-cultural practices and ethnocentric narratives. [40] In the case of all three main contenders within the Macedonian dispute, however, otherness has been outside the cognitive reach of each respective group. That elevates the role of institutionalized mediating agencies. For instance, traditionally a Bulgarian would know what modern Macedonian history scholarship and national mythology are about not because of first-hand experience with the relevant sources (books, media, personal encounters etc.), but thanks to the communicating functions of certain institutions (historians, media, education system).[41] Similarly, in the Socialist Republic of Macedonia and later in the independent Macedonian republic, policies of rigid control over printed materials coming from Bulgaria were implemented until recently [42], while the local academics were busy countering their Bulgarian colleagues' claims and, for that matter, supplying themselves

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[40] A rather illustrative statement coming from a Macedonian high-ranking official puts it in a nice way: 'We have used that name [Macedonia] for centuries to try to draw a distinction between us as a people and the surrounding people, the Bulgarians, the Serbs, the Greeks and the Albanians . . . It is very important to our identity.' Duncan Perry, 'The Republic of Macedonia and the Odds for Survival'. RFE/RL Research Report 1 (November): 12-19, here p. 15. In fact, there are arguments that the domestic-foreign or sameness-otherness dichotomies are inherent in the construction of every type of political community and is not necessarily reserved for nations or ethnic groups. R.B.J. Walker, *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1993).

[41] On the intimate link between communication and nation-building, see Benedict Anderson., *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983); and Karl Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication : An Inquiry into the Foundations of Nationality,* (Cambridge, Mass :MIT Press, 1953). On the special role of historiography in the region, cf. Dennis Diletant, Harry Hanack, John Daly (eds.), *Historians as Nation-builders: Central and South-East Europe* (London: Macmillan Press: 1988).

[42] Stephen Palmer and Robert King, *Yugoslav Communism and the Macedonian Question* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1971), p. 157; Dina Kyriakidou,, 'End of Book Ban Ignites Debate in Macedonia', Reuters, 8 July 1999.

with the needed materials. [43] The information filters, as well as the dependence on interpreters, have been even more important in the case of Greece due to mutual incomprehensibility of between the Greeks and their Slavic-speaking neighbors to the North. In the Balkans, that hermeneutic landscape, which is by no means a recent creation, has emphasised the traditional weight of different elite groups (scholars, politicians, journalists) in informing the mass attitudes and building reified and sustainable, in most cases negative, images of the opposing party.[44]

To a great extent, the Internet and CMC in general undermine those structures of information channeling and control over the domestic projections of the 'Other'. The Web's decentralised makeup allows for direct contact with the 'others', which oftentimes brings to the fore the discrepancies between preconceptions and actuality. It is as much a means for intra-group mobilization and reaffirmation of existing borders, for political propaganda and reproduction of concepts of self-other relationships, as a platform for non-mediated interpersonal exchange among individuals embracing different perspectives and identities.[45]

The latter twofold impact introduces the chief dilemma, encountered when trying to assess the role of the Internet in regard to the ongoing disputes over the history of Macedonia and its inhabitants. To put it in more basic terms, one should ask the question whether the enhanced communication capacity exacerbates tensions and animosities or, on the contrary, promotes greater understanding through the sustainable practices of

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[43] It is noteworthy to mention a somewhat anecdotic event, which is quite telling. In an interview with Nikolay Kanchev of Bulgaria's VMRO stated that he together with the late Prilep-born publicist and historian Kosta Curnushanov several years ago accidentally met, to their surprise and his alarm, the renowned Macedonian scholar Blazhe Ristovski in the Head Quarters of the 'enemy' VMRO in Sofia, where the latter had visited the bookstore in order to purchase several volumes of interest. Kunchev stated that he had seen Dr Gane Todorovski in the same bookshop too. On the other hand, my observations have assured me that the holdings of books and periodicals published in Skopje at the library of the Macedonian Scientific Institute in Sofia are considerable.

[44] Cf. 'The Image of the Other conveyed in education, in particular in history teaching and in the teaching materials used in this field in the Balkan countries', Minutes from the debate at *The Balkans – Ethnic and Cultural Crossroads* conference (Sofia, Bulgaria, 27-30 May 1995) In: Maria Couroucli (rapporteur), *The Balkans – Ethnic and Cultural Crossroads: Educational and Cultural Aspects,* (Council of Europe, 1995), , pp. 17 – 19. Summary at http://book.coe.int/GB/CAT/LIV/HTM/l753.htm .

[45] For a general discussion of the relationship between nation-states and CMC, see Jerry Everard, *Virtual States: the Internet and the Boundaries of the Nation-State* (London : Routledge, 2000), hereafter *Virtual States*, and Ryuhey Hosoya, *Cyberspace and Virtual Diplomacy: the End of the Nation-State?* (Tokyo: Institute for International Policy Studies, 1997).

addressing and negotiating issues of diversity and identity. Is the Internet, in that particular instance, a platform fostering dialogue amongst different groups and disenfranchising the officialdom, which has been inherently dominating the debates and conflicts over on identity?

The rich empirical evidence supplied by various web forums and Usenet discussion groups suggests that the both effects are present side by side. On the one hand, the anonymity granted by the Internet fuels certain negative occurrences such as the excessive usage of hate speech. Given the total lack of restraints in most interactive platforms [46], it is precisely within the virtual space that entrenched animosities are expressed in a most far-reaching way. [47] Besides the customary offensive vocabulary evidenced in qualifications such as '(Turko)Tatars', 'Gyspy Skopians', 'Serbocommunists' and the like that are apparently products of discourses of ethnic and ideological purity/impurity, superiority/inferiority, inbuilt in many nationalist worldviews, there are specific forms of hatred and intolerant behavior encountered only in the Internet. Those include the practice of spamming (the virtual 'bombardment' of the opponent's forum with meaningless, yet voluminous masses of information, meant to prevent it from functioning efficiently), posting messages written in capitalized characters (equal to shouting in real-life conversation), extensive presence of abusive language etc. The Internet turns into yet another battlefield of contending nationalist dogmas, which reproduces the patterns of internal cohesiveness and exclusion of otherness.

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[46] The only possible option for imposing standards is in the hands of the moderators, where the group or forum is a moderated one, although that does not necessarily imply that rules of propriety are generally observed in those either.

[47] Consider the following message:
Posted by: United_Mk (63.44.105.112)
Date: June 6, 2001 at 03:35 p.m.
F*** YOU ALBANIANS, F*** YOU GREEKS, F***
YOU TATAROBULGARIANS.
F*** YOU GREKOMANS
F*** YOU BUGAROFILS
F*** YOU SERBOMANS
F*** YOU SOLANA
F*** YOU ROBERTSON
F*** USA ALBANIAN ORIENTED POLITICS
F*** EVERYTHING AGAINST MACEDONIA.
DUSHMANI DA DIE ALL!!!UMRETE SITE!!!
http://www.ravelly.com/members/macedonia/index.php?read=21547 (*Macedonia for the Macedonians* Forum). The link may be defunct due to the constant renovation of the forum.

Unlike the top-down paradigms, which presume the critical role of elite groups and hierarchical structures in general, in interpreting the borders of identity and defying the claims of rival groups, it is the very decentralised framework of the virtual space, which brings about the above extremism. The democratic character Internet access ensuring that everybody can participate in the any discussion, is coupled with the lack of norms as to how one should present his or her arguments.[48] That should be contrasted with the way similar controversies take place involving different type of actors. In the case of historiography one observes that the constraining factor is the requirements of scientific language and the standards of argumentation; in the case of diplomacy it is the even more rigid rules of speech. The new means of communication inevitably redefines the rules of exchange among the parties and minimizes the chances for curbing hate-speech and limiting aggression. The asymmetry between each user's unabridged liberty to express certain views and his/ her unaccountability for libel or abusive postings combined with the sensitive issues surrounding the set of disputes over Macedonia make, in some sense, the web a good case-study of how nationalist antagonisms are reproduced on a popular level.

On the other hand, the interactive web loci are something more than places where animosity is rekindled and extreme forms of nationalism flourish. In my view, the Web has had its beneficial effects. As already pointed out, the very presence of means for direct contacts among individuals sharing interest in specific subjects (i.e. the Macedonian Question) is a step ahead, no matter how divergent the participants' views might be or what national agenda they might try to advance. There are many instances when dialogue does take place and, arguably, the chief factor for online belligerence is the particular discussant's personality (particularly characteristics such as motivation, attitudes, beliefs, age, social status, education,). There is no general inability to engage in dialogue attributable to the very nature of the Macedonian issues and amplified by the Web's state of virtual anarchy. A critical aspect of the question how CMC have impacted these issues, therefore, relates to the profile of the people who usually partake in discussions over the Internet touching on Macedonia. For the purposes of inquiring into

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[48] There are certain forums, which require prior registration or involve applying for a password to an Administrator (*Bulgaria-Macedonia Diaspora Forum*, http://members.boardhost.com/Bulgaria).

that problem, a brief questionnaire was distributed to several of the discussions forums[49] and one of the mailing lists [50] operating in the Internet. The feedback obtained, however inaccurate it may be judged in terms of hard-core social science methodology, brings up some insights, which are crucially important in approaching the question how the Internet and the Macedonian Question relate to each other.

Firstly, it is interesting to observe that at present most of the participants in the studied groups come either from Macedonian or Bulgarian background, conceived in national terms. Within those groups, one should distinguish the emigrant communities, which are particularly active in the case of the Macedonian party and less so in the case of the Macedono-Bulgarian group.[51] The Greeks located in the diaspora or in Greece shape the third important faction, which tends to participate mainly in the discussions in the Usenet groups (newsgroups) due to the fact that the predominant language in the newsgroups is English and that the Usenet format was the first one to emerge at the time when tensions over the name and the national symbols of Macedonia were still high (mid 1990s). Another thing that attracts the Greeks' interest are the forums maintained by the Ancients, [52] which is explained by the priority given by Greek and Macedonian nationalists to the conflict over Ancient Macedon's legacy. The participation of other nationally defined groups or users either in the web forums or in the Usenet has been quite limited.[53]

The series of interviews present the opinions of Internet users belonging to the Macedonian and Bulgarian group. The absence of representatives of the other factions is a shortcoming of the sample, especially in the case of the Greek participants, but nevertheless it is important to note that the two canvassed groups are very significant in

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[49] http://forums.big-blue.net/cgi-bin/wwwthreads/wwwthreads.pl http://clubs.dir.bg/postlist.php?Cat=7&Board=maked , http://members.boardhost.com/Bulgaria .

[50] The mailling list is owned by Tom (Tasho) Alusheff, a third-generation Macedono-Bulgarian living in the USA. It is aimed at and used by Internet users from the Macedonian diaspora of both Bulgarian and Macedonian national orientation.

[51] By Macedono-Bulgarian, I mean the descendants of the Macedonian immigrants who came to the USA and Canada in the first half of the XX century, adhering to the Macedonian Patriotic Organization (MPO). See http://www.macedonian.org .

[52] http://www.ravelly.com/members/macedonia/index.php (Bill Nicholov's *Macedonia for the Macedonians* Forum).

[53] This is situation is somewhat altered now when the conflict in Macedonia has brought at odds Macedonians and Albanians. Users maintaining views, which reflect Albanian nationalist claims, are now becoming ever more frequent. Yet it is important to note that the present problem is not an outgrowth of the 'classical' Macedonian Question and is a separate issue in its own right.

terms of the questions the present paper addresses, notably how the identity of the Slavic inhabitants of geographical Macedonia through time is discussed in the virtual space.

Pinning down the contours of the overall community of Macedonian-oriented Internet users, it is necessary highlight a feature, largely reflected in all interviews and easily observable when analyzing the websites. The participants in the discussions, respectively the website visitors/designers, of longest practice as a rule come from the diaspora communities.[54] Some of them have commenced posting as early as 1995. As already pointed out, it is relatively easy to account for that by paying attention to the fact that CMC technologies first became common and widely used in these parts of the world where these emigrant communities are found (North America, Australia) earlier than in the countries of origin (Macedonia, Greece, Bulgaria etc.). That should be juxtaposed with the observation that the earliest pages dealing with the Macedonian issue were built precisely by members of those expatriate communities. Since they have always been on the forefront of ethnic mobilization, especially during the heyday of the conflict over the Republic of Macedonia's name and national symbols, it becomes even more transparent what conditions the wide participation of those groups.[55]

Among the interviewees that have started to participate in the discussions at later stages, there are more individuals located in the Republic of Macedonia and Bulgaria. Essentially, this suggests that the proliferation of Internet technology has brought about wider participation in the ongoing debates and engaged the attention of broader groups outside the politically active nuclei within the diaspora communities. The greatest part of the newcomers, a distinctive group differing from the Usenet-based core of original discussants, is, as a rule, of younger age (late teens, early twenties), which additionally sets them apart from the first-wave of users who tend to be older. [56]

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[54] Interviews with Dan Balaloski (USA), 10 April 2001 and Tinko Eftimov (Canada), 9 April 2001.

[55] Addressing the question of diaspora radicalism, it is worth mentioning that it is a phenomenon of long standing. For instance, Macedonian émigré communities have been in favor of the idea of secession from Yugoslavia, long before the crisis unfolded and separation became imminent for the Republic. Their attitude should be contrasted with those of mainstream associations under the control of the Skopje authorities. For further information on those groups, see http://www.homestead.com/doomum/ (*Movement for Liberation and Unification of Macedonia*).

[56] Interviews with Hristo Tsenov (Bulgaria), 1 June 2001, Kole Nedelkovski (R Macedonia), 25 May 2001 and Stefan Kurshakov (Bulgaria) 11 Apr 2001.

A principal question included in the interviews relates to the motivation of the interviewees to participate in the Internet discussions. Three main themes come through in the answers. First, it is the need to assert the interviewee's standpoint on the Macedonian issues.[57] Second, it is in the interest in the issues per se and the desire to learn more about them.[58] The third view common view links the motivation to carry one discussion with their counterparts of different national identity and/or dissenting opinion for the sake of greater understanding. [59]

When asked whether the actual outcome of the debates is satisfactory, the participants' answers seem to be rather in the negative. Most of the interviewees, regardless of the position they adhere to, express the opinion that, for the most part, the discussions fall short of what they find desirable. That unsatisfactory result is ascribed to the opponents' often engagement and predilection for mere propaganda, as well as their failure to observe the rules of fair and unemotional discussion.[60]

On the background of that reserved attitude towards the value of discussing, it should be pointed out that the attendance in the discussions has never declined over the years and the number of forums, where all views are represented, has actually multiplied. The daily average on the Macedonia Forum on http://clubs.dir.bg [61] amounts to over a thirty. The discussions on Macedonia, and particularly on its contested history and identity, which involve the whole spectrum of perspectives, are unlikely to cease or even abate. On the contrary, the empirical evidence testifies that participation is growing, which is attributable precisely to the spread of CMC. Certainly, it cannot be explained by exclusively stressing the emotional weight of the issues because it is evident that with the gradual affirmation of the Republic of Macedonia's place in the international community, as well as the shifts in its foreign policy over the past decade, the tensions on interstate level have considerably subsided. The recognition issue is not a central anymore for the Republic of Macedonia, Greece, or Bulgaria, so the kind of social mobilization that was present in the beginning of the 1990s, especially in the first two countries, is not a

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[57] Interviews with Stefan Kurshakov and Ljubomir Grozdanov (Bulgaria), 10 April 2001.
[58] Interview with Ljubomir Grozdanov.
[59] Interviews with Georgi Mushev (Canada) , 9 April 2001 and Tinko Eftimov.
[60] Interviews with Dan Balaloski, Lena Markova (Australia), 10 April 2001, Tinko Eftimov.
[61] http://clubs.dir.bg/postlist.php?Cat=7&Board=maked .

decisive factor as of today. In fact, it can be argued that the respective governments have largely abdicated from the politics of identity,[62] leaving the whole business of negotiating the respective issues in the hands of individuals and civil-society structures. The Web intercourse is an aspect in that process of political disengagement. As it is observed at present, the durable effect of the communication opportunities granted by the Internet is intergroup dialogue. The very fact that the latter informs the motivation of the interviewees is encouraging. The fragmented and mutually exclusive identities interacting within the discussion places, together with the controversial character of the topics, do accentuate the established cleavages. Nevertheless, they can hardly exacerbate or have a lasting negative impact on a conflict, whose dynamics have been so greatly contingent on a qualitatively different mechanisms of information generating and distributing.

Conclusion

The central question posed by this paper can be reframed in the following way. Given the enormous potential of CMC technology to transmit ideas, opinions and information on a subject formerly monopolised by hierarchies of institutions (governments, academia, education authorities, historiographies) have had an unquestioned monopoly, can one foresee the transcendence, (at least on the part of some users engaged in the practices of daily exchange), of the fault-lines in favor of a peculiar kind of community centered around the very interest in the issues of Macedonia's? If we apply Rheingold's definition that virtual communities constitute 'social aggregations that emerge from the [Internet] when enough people carry out those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace' *[63]*, we will see that the implied group cohesiveness is hardly there, Yet the structural prerequisite of a public space shared by a sufficient number of people is a major asset, whose presence is

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[62] A good example to that effect is the agreement concluded between Bulgaria and the Republic of Macedonia bringing an end to the so-called 'language dispute'. It circumvented the problem of language recognition, using the formula 'the official languages of both countries' and referring to the relevant provisions in their constitutions. For the full text of the declaration in English, http://makedon.mtx.net/joint_d.htm . For research on the non-governmental sector's involvement in the bilateral relations, cf. the final paper produced by the project *Networking Between Bulgarian and Macedonian NGOs for Political Resolution of Problems in Bilateral Relations,* International Institute of Regional and International Studies, Sofia, http://www.iris-bg.org/policy_report.htm .

[63] H. Rheingold, *The Virtual Communities, Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier,* (Reading, MA: (Addison Wesley, 1993.), p. 5. On the same subject, see N.K. Baym, 'The Emergence of Community in Computer-meditated Communication' In: Steve G. Jones, (ed.) *Cybersociety: Computer–mediated Communication and Community*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1995).

observable and whose impact must not be understated. The potential of the web to foster new group identities should never be exaggerated in that case, since it is distinguishable from other cases whereby users align because of shared interests or qualities, which are not related to a controversy (e.g. the virtual community of a football team or a rock band who discuss that on a regular basis over the Internet). There are two key factors that bring together the (quasi-) community in question. First, it is the common point of reference (Macedonia). However conflict-ridden stances may be and however little the exchange may go beyond the unilateral propagation of one's views, it is clear that the topic by invariably attracts adherents of different perspectives to the respective public spaces and thus brings about an identification with the *particular forum* and the *other participants there*. The other factor, which proves to be important in the Bulgarian-Macedonian discussions, is the closeness and mutual comprehensibility of the standardised languages (not to mention the dialects or the mixtures between the two idioms that are widely encountered in those discussions). That constitutes another important bond, which is directly related to the impact of the Web.[64]

The practice of daily exchange of information, therefore, is the central moment in the CMC effect on the 'Macedonian Question'. The most websites' one-sided assertiveness has, in my view, only a secondary significance. Contrary to what Ananda Mitra observes, the tendency towards exclusion or silencing of otherness, has never been so prominent, as far as cyberspace interaction in the examined circumstances is concerned. Although most of the forums bear a national label (for example, the Macedonia Forum on http://clubs.dir.bg is considered to be Bulgarian, www.big-blue.net - Macedonian and so forth) the participation of 'others' is very common and not just an 'aberrational phenomenon' as in the case of Indian-Pakistani discussions described by Mitra.[65] The Internet is primarily about calling into question the staunch divisions that characterise national identities.[66] Without underestimating its importance as a tool for

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[64] It is spectacular indeed to observe how little it takes to the Bulgarian participants in the discussion forums and Usenet groups to learn how to express themselves in literary Macedonian, and vice versa, Macedonians (in the national sense) using standard Bulgarian words and expressions. Here, the emphasis should be put on the fact that there are many users that read on a daily basis the online versions of the newspapers of the respective country.

[65] Ananda Mitra,, *Virtual Commonality: Looking for India on the Internet* In : Steve Jones (ed.), *Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety* (London : Sage, 1997), p. 72.

[66] Jerry Everard, *Virtual States.*

self-assertion, we may be certain that in the Macedonian case the Web has been playing a more complex role. It is safe to say that this role has less to do with reinforcing the established borders then with making them more permeable.