

PROLOGUE

DECEMBER 11, 1992 will go down in the history of international relations as the day that gave birth to the first and, thus far, the only United Nations operation in preventive diplomacy and troop deployment. On that day, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 795 (1992), authorizing the secretary general to establish a presence of the United Nations Protection Force in the Former Yugoslavia (UNPROFOR) in the Republic of Macedonia. This mission, subsequently known as the United Nations Preventive Deployment Force (UNPREDEP), was to be hosted by a young country, which had just emerged from the Yugoslav Federation—unlike the destructive examples of several other Yugoslav republics declaring independence—without a single shot being fired.

A call from New York

On a Thursday in early May of 1995, I was on a brief home leave in Warsaw following the preparations for and observances of the International Year of the Family, which I had coordinated worldwide on behalf of the United Nations. The message in the phone call from New York was loud and clear: “The secretary-general would like you to come to New York without delay. We do not know the reason.” I cannot say I was not worried. Boutros-Ghali had been known for his tough treatment of staff. Yet for the life of me, I couldn’t think of what I’d done to deserve a personal dressing down at headquarters—by the secretary-general himself, no less.

Having stopped for a day at my duty station in Vienna, on Monday morning I reported to my boss in New York, Undersecretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs Nitin Desai. He was either really unaware of

the purpose of my visit to headquarters or thought that it might be better if the news be broken to me by the secretary-general himself or by others in his senior staff. Desai immediately informed the Office of the Secretary-General of my arrival. We were instructed to wait, and wait we did until the following day, when I was received by Boutros-Ghali's chef de cabinet and informed that I was under consideration for the post of chief of mission for UNPREDEP in Macedonia, at the level of assistant secretary-general. If I agreed to accept the post, I was told, I should contact Undersecretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations Kofi Annan for further details.

It was not until I saw Kofi Annan that I understood what a unique professional chance I was being offered. The unprecedented nature of a UN presence in Macedonia opened up opportunities that, if properly seized, might also set a model for, and pace of, conflict prevention elsewhere in the world. I decided to head up this rather novel experiment in UN peacekeeping—except, in this case, the mission's mandate was to make sure there would be a peace to keep.

In mid-June, just prior to my introductory visit to Macedonia, I had learned that a Macedonian government minister was in Vienna, attending the session of one of the functional commissions of the United Nations Economic and Social Council. I invited him to lunch, ready to listen attentively to what he would have to say on my forthcoming mission in his country. Right from the start, however, even before I had time to introduce myself properly, my interlocutor started bombarding me with questions regarding the Balkans. His basic query was whether I had ever been to that part of Europe. I had, I said, mostly on a few short business and private visits to former Yugoslavia; but, no, I had never served in the region. A severe expression of doubt appeared on the minister's face, and it did not seem to help much when I mentioned my thirty-five years in the foreign service, in both Poland's diplomatic corps and on the UN's senior staff; the long specialization in UN affairs; and my own homework on the Balkans, as well as the excellent briefings I had been given by many experts before my forthcoming departure to Skopje. Ultimately, the minister decided not to press me any further but did have a warning to sound: "You always have to remember that there are two sides to reality in the Balkans—one over the table, the other under the table." I was grateful to the minister for the warning as on several occasions in the following thirty-nine months I would become acutely aware of its significance. With the

passing time, I was to learn several more traits of the unique Balkan mentality.

First visits to Skopje

On June 19 and 20, I paid my introductory visit to Skopje. On the first day, as I was escorted to see President Kiro Gligorov, I entered his spacious office on the second floor of the parliament building. The president stepped forward to greet me. He extended his arms toward me and said: "Mister Sokalski, from friendly Poland!" I later thought that I should have perhaps added, ". . . and from the friendly United Nations!" Upon reflection, however, I understood his words addressed to me as his recognition of the fact that the secretary-general of the United Nations was sending on this important mission someone from another country in transition, a country with a rich tradition of contacts with the former Yugoslavia, including Macedonia. This national "bonding" proved particularly helpful to me in the months to come, especially among Macedonia's ethnic communities, while the first meeting with President Gligorov had established the practice of my frequent discussions with him on a variety of issues regarding the United Nations presence and role in Macedonia.

On July 5, 1995, I arrived in Skopje again, this time to assume my permanent duties as head of mission. My arrival coincided with the visit to UNPREDEP of one of our senior colleagues from UN headquarters who was interested in meeting some leaders of Macedonia's major political parties. He was short on time, so it was suggested that he meet the party representatives together in one group. The party leaders flatly refused. They neither wished to be seen together nor create an impression that they shared common views that might be misunderstood by both their own publics and representatives of the international community. Consequently, each party leader spent no more than twenty minutes with our guest from New York and, in principle, discussed the very same topics subsequently taken up by others during their separate meetings with him. This unwillingness to enter into a shared dialogue was the characteristic feature of Macedonia's political elites until the mid-1990s.

"Because we are in the Balkans!"

From my first day as head of UNPREDEP in Macedonia, I would pose many different questions to my local interlocutors. Many times, I would

ponder a particular aspect of the country's social and political life and ask them, "Why so?" Their customary response would be, "Because we are in the Balkans!" I had consistently tried to fight this strange kind of Balkan fatalism, although toward the end of my stay there my earlier persistence seemed to have waned somewhat. History has its own inexplicable dynamics. For Churchill, the problem was the region's excess of history compared to its relatively small geography. My problem, however, was the region's future—specifically, its high potential for unpredictable post-Cold War events. Indeed, who could have ever predicted the disintegration of Yugoslavia? Who could have anticipated the inexcusable and devastating wars in a region that, in many respects, was the least expected not to be able to cope with such a crisis?

The quest for answers seemed to be unending.