

UDC 930.85(4-12)

YU ISSN 0350-7653

SERBIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES AND ARTS
INSTITUTE FOR BALKAN STUDIES

BALCANICA

XXXIX (2008)

ANNUAL OF THE INSTITUTE FOR BALKAN STUDIES

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BELGRADE
2009



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In the Shadow of the Macedonian Issue

**International Re-alignments and Balkan Repercussions
from the Greek-Yugoslav Agreements of 18 June 1959
to the 1960 Crisis in Relations between Athens and Belgrade**

Abstract: The 1960s were a decade of important developments in the Balkans. Skopje's stirring up of the issue of the supposed "Macedonian" minority led to a series of diplomatic clashes between Greece and Yugoslavia, culminating in the 1960–1962 crisis. A major role in developments in the Balkans was played by the Soviet Union, which, directly or indirectly, greatly influenced the shaping of Yugoslav foreign policy. The crisis began in August 1960 when, for the first time since 1950, the Yugoslavia Foreign Ministry publicly raised the question of protecting the rights of the "Macedonian minority". While the Athens-Belgrade crisis was not serious enough to lead them to break off diplomatic relations, it did have a catalytic effect on the shaping of Bulgarian policy with regard to the Macedonian question. After the restoration of democracy in Greece (1974), and despite her need for support from Yugoslavia on the Cyprus issue, the Karamanlis government did not repeat the "mistakes" of 1959. Belgrade, having secured in 1975 a renewal of the agreement on the free zone in the Port of Thessaloniki, did not insist on signing a border agreement. The Macedonian question had become of no more than academic interest in the discussions of politicians on both sides of the border, and the crisis of 1960–62 merely a forgotten flare-up.

Keywords: Balkans, Yugoslavia, Greece, Macedonian issue, 1960s crisis, Bulgaria

The 1960s were a decade of important developments in the Balkans.¹ Skopje's stirring up of the issue of the supposed "Macedonian" minority led to a series of diplomatic clashes between Greece and Yugoslavia, culminating in the 1960–1962 crisis. A major role in developments in the Balkans was played by the Soviet Union, which, directly or indirectly, greatly influenced the shaping of Yugoslav foreign policy.

After the death of Stalin, the new Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, embarked on a de-Stalinization campaign in order to secure his position in the Soviet Union and the Socialist camp in general. In order to prevent Yugoslavia from adhering more closely to the West, he restored Soviet-Yugoslav relations, a move that was formalised with the signature of the decla-

¹ This paper has resulted from my broader research into twentieth-century Balkan history, published in part in my book *In the Shadow of the Macedonian Issue* (Thessaloniki 2007). The documentary sources and bibliography are quoted at the end of the paper.

rations of Belgrade (1955) and Moscow (1956), by which the Soviet Union recognised Yugoslavia's different road to Socialism. Nonetheless, Yugoslavia did not adhere to the Warsaw Pact, and Yugoslav foreign policy was based on the doctrine of maintaining an equal distance from East and West.

It was not long, however, before relations between Moscow and Belgrade soured. In October 1956 the reform movement in Hungary, fruit of that country's de-Stalinization campaign, turned into an anti-Communist revolution; this was snuffed out by two Soviet military interventions. Yugoslavia's attitude to the Hungarian question displeased the Soviets. Tito condemned the use of armed force, arguing that the first Soviet intervention was not necessary and the second was a necessary evil. The fate of Nagy and the other Hungarian political figures who sought asylum in the Yugoslav Embassy was a fresh cause of tension in Yugoslav-Soviet relations.

A typical example of the coolness between the two countries was Yugoslavia's refusal to sign the "Declaration of the 12 Governing Communist Parties", which called for the Communist and Workers' Parties to coordinate their common struggle for peace, democracy and socialism and indirectly recognised the Soviet Union's leading role in the Socialist world. The Bulgarian government, which appeared to benefit from the tension that had been created, encouraged Bulgarian historians to trumpet the "distortions their history had suffered at the hands of Skopjian historians". Another green light was given in Khrushchev's address to a congress of the Communist Party of Bulgaria, when he called Tito a "Trojan horse of imperialism".

While this negative climate was chilling relations between Moscow and Belgrade, the latter's co-operation with Athens was visibly increasing. Greece, Yugoslavia and Turkey had entered into a Balkan Friendship and Cooperation Agreement in 1953. Relations between the three were governed by the spirit of this Balkan Pact until the deteriorating climate between Greece and Turkey caused by the Cyprus conflict virtually extinguished it. Greece and Yugoslavia, on the other hand, had their own separate reasons for wanting to strengthen it. Greece, sure of Yugoslavia's support in the Cyprus problem, believed that a rapprochement between the three countries would help resolve the matter. Yugoslavia, meanwhile, wanted to revive the Pact primarily for defensive reasons. Turkey, however, had turned its attention toward the Middle East in 1955 and was no longer interested in the Balkan Pact.

This Pact notwithstanding, the Greek and Yugoslav positions with regard to international and Balkan affairs were not the same. Greece and Yugoslavia reacted in different ways to US President Dwight Eisenhower's decision to deploy missiles in NATO countries. The Karamanlis government wanted to strengthen NATO, arguing that this was necessary in the

climate that had developed after the signing of the Zurich and London agreements “for the resolution of the Cyprus conflict”. When Romanian Prime Minister Chivu Stoica proposed a “missile-free Balkans”, the Greek government rejected the idea. In 1959 Soviet policy in the Balkans focused on preventing the deployment of NATO missiles in Greece. The Soviet Union threatened to install nuclear bases in Albania and Bulgaria if Greece gave in to American pressure, the aim being to frighten Greece, whose relations with those two countries were not good. Yugoslavia, however, fearing a stronger Soviet presence in the Balkans, supported Stoica’s proposition.

Despite the differences in their positions in international affairs, Greece and Yugoslavia continued to develop their bilateral co-operation. In June 1959 the two countries signed twelve agreements, fruit of the “Mixed Commission on Economic, Cultural and Technical Affairs” that had been set up in 1958. These agreements, most of them economic and technical, were accepted by the Greek political world without reaction, except for that on cross-border communication. This agreement provided that the border cards to be issued to facilitate freedom of movement in the predetermined border zone would be printed in the official languages of both countries. In practice this meant using the “Slav-Macedonian” tongue, which was one of the official languages of Yugoslavia. Greek opposition politicians, largely for reasons of domestic opposition policy, accused the Karamanlis government of recognising the “Slav-Macedonian” language and underestimating the Slav danger. The Karamanlis government replied that all it was recognising was the Yugoslav constitution. Greece could not prevent the use of the “Slav-Macedonian” tongue within Yugoslavia, but would in no case issue border cards in Greece in that language. As for the danger of Skopjian propaganda, Yugoslav foreign policy was, it stressed, determined in Belgrade and not in Skopje. The local authorities in some villages in Western Macedonia reacted very strongly: conditioned by the anti-Slav syndrome of the post-civil war era, they organised oath-taking ceremonies in which Slav-speakers swore never to use the Slav idiom again. These, however, were just isolated incidents, and were not instigated by the Greek government, which assured the Yugoslav government that it condemned such actions. In any case, Athens told Belgrade, and whatever the reaction, the agreements would be ratified.

Greece, however, which had placed its hopes in Yugoslavia to ensure the smooth functioning of cross-border communication and to prevent Skopje from stirring up any minority issues, was belied. In 1960 new factors on the international scene and in the Balkan region led to a cooling in relations between the two countries.

In 1960–61 the Cold War was heating up. The Soviet downing of an American spy plane taking photographs of military installations in the

Soviet Union sparked a fiery war of words and led to the failure of the Paris Peace Summit in May 1960. In this climate of international tension the Soviet Union decided to impose a radical solution on the Berlin issue by building a wall through the city (August 1961). In international matters concerning collective security (a missile-free Balkans, the Berlin question) Yugoslavia supported the Soviet Union, although it had already embarked on an independent foreign policy path.

The years 1960–61 also saw the break-up of the Socialist camp, with breaches between the Soviet Union and China and between the Soviet Union and Albania. The souring of relations between Albania and the Soviet Union led to a blossoming of Albania's relations with China and a rapprochement between the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia condemned China's opportunism and supported the Soviet Union, which in Tito's view posed no threat to his country.

These new circumstances had an impact on relations between Greece and Yugoslavia. When Skopje decided to revive the question of the "Macedonian minority" in Greece, Belgrade did not react. There were a number of reasons behind the stirring up of this issue. With the cooling-off in Soviet-Yugoslav relations, the Bulgarian organisation MPO (Macedonian Patriotic Organisation) had become very active in America, denying the existence of a Macedonian ethnicity and raising the issue of the protection of the rights of the Bulgarian minority in Greece. The basic position of this organisation was a "united and independent Macedonia". By raising the Macedonian question as a Bulgarian issue, the MPO gave Greece an argument against Skopje's claims regarding a Macedonian ethnicity and Macedonian minorities, regardless of the fact that the Bulgarian factor differed only formally from the Slav-Macedonian. In the early months of 1960, perhaps influenced by the signing of the Greek-Yugoslav agreements, the action of the Bulgarian-Macedonians in America was stepped up and the Western Macedonian Greek communities in Canada and America devoted themselves to the struggle to combat Bulgarian propaganda. This was a blow to Skopje, since the MPO, as an anti-Communist, Bulgarian-nationalist organisation, was a feared rival, until Communist Bulgaria overcame its ideological complex sufficiently to counter-attack. The press in Northern Greece frequently cited both the Bulgarian propaganda the organisation was conducting in America and the defensive activity of the Greeks living there.

The issue of the return of Slav-Macedonian refugees from the Eastern countries, particularly from Poland, was complicated by the fact that Yugoslavia could not absorb them in large numbers, while the Bulgarian government offered to resettle them in Bulgaria and to that end sent agents to Poland to win them over. The dispute between Bulgaria and Yugoslavia

over the ethnic identity of the Slavs of Macedonia had moved beyond the narrow confines of the Balkans.

In April-May 1960 a *cause célèbre* came up before the Permanent Court Martial in Athens, when a large group of Greek Communists were accused of spying for the international Communist movement. The defence statements attacked both the stance of the CPG on the Macedonian issue and the role of Yugoslavia in the Greek civil war, and most of the accused stressed the need for respecting the rights of the "Macedonian minority".

In response to this trial, the Central Committee of the Union of Communists of Yugoslavia met on 18 May 1960 specifically to discuss the Macedonian question and Greek-Yugoslav relations. The position adopted by both Skopje and Belgrade was expressed by the Speaker of the House and former Premier of the FPR Macedonia, Lazar Koliševski, who stated that "the objective of the trial of the Communists in Greece was to strike fear into and to silence the Macedonian population, so that they would deny their ethnic identity". He also opined that the Greek side "was abusing its relations with Yugoslavia so as to erase the Macedonian question" and, in closing, argued that it was a duty of the Yugoslav government to act vigorously in the matter, since Greece and Bulgaria were doing the same.

A number of other political figures aligned themselves with Koliševski, among them Foreign Minister Koča Popović and Deputy Prime Minister Edvard Kardelj. By the time the conference closed, a coordinated policy, to be followed by Belgrade and Skopje, had been worked out: the Skopjjan press would have a relatively free hand to stir up the minority issue and the federal government would pursue an active campaign through political announcements, without however seeking to cause a rupture in the country's relations with Greece.

The crisis began in August 1960 when, for the first time since 1950, the Yugoslav Foreign Ministry publicly raised the question of protecting the rights of the "Macedonian minority". A war of words promptly broke out between Greece and Yugoslavia, with both countries holding fast to their positions. Greece maintained that there was no question of a "Macedonian" minority in its territory and that the remaining Slav-speakers there considered themselves to be Greeks. Yugoslavia, for its part, accused the Greek government of essentially bringing the issue to the foreground (through the oath-taking ceremonies and the trial of Communists) and demanded the immediate recognition of the "minority".

A meeting between Averoff and Popović held on the island of Brioni in July 1960 seemed to mark the beginning of a relaxation of the diplomatic and political tension that had been created. Averoff and Popović reached their first "gentlemen's agreement", which provided simply for mutual efforts to prevent the issue from escalating into a serious dispute, but did

nothing to assuage the Greek government's worries that Skopje would exploit the aspects of the agreement concerning cross-border communication. In a memorandum delivered to the Yugoslav Ambassador, the Greeks attempted to direct the Yugoslav government's attention to what was going on in the border zone. It cited the uncontrolled activity of certain Slav-Macedonian circles, whose behaviour was an affront to the inhabitants of Western Macedonia: they were urging bilingual Greeks to declare themselves as "Macedonians", encouraging them to speak "Slav-Macedonian", and collecting oral accounts of the period of the Axis occupation and the civil war for a "national history of Macedonia". The chief agents were the Slav-Macedonian refugees from Greek Macedonia in the FPRM, who had become a pressure group working on the government in Skopje.

The Karamanlis government might not have attached such importance to this sort of incidents had they not been accompanied by Yugoslav politicians' official speeches insisting on the issue of the protection of the rights of the "Macedonian" minority. A characteristic example was Koliševski's historically inaccurate speech at the Socialist Union Congress in October 1960, which further inflamed the spirits. Once again the Speaker of the House in Skopje openly accused Greece of indifference to its obligations toward the "Macedonian" minority within its borders, which according to him had been established by the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920. He also accused the Greek press of supporting the activity (in America) of the MPO, which presented the Macedonian question as a Bulgarian issue and rejected Skopje's position on the existence of a "Macedonian" nation.

Koliševski's speech caused a political storm in Athens when it became known that it had been made in the presence of Kardelj. The Greek diplomats considered this speech a breach of the Averoff-Popović gentlemen's agreement and hastened to demand explanations from the Yugoslav government. The Karamanlis government indeed had serious reasons to be worried about its survival, for the political statements that were issuing from Skopje were providing fuel for the opposition.

The Yugoslav government replied that the episodes in the border zone were isolated incidents and that Greece had no reason for concern, and promised to admonish the Yugoslav people to refrain from any political activity in Greece.

These developments in the Balkans also affected the final position of the Karamanlis government in the matter. As has been said, 1961 was the year when Albania broke off its relations with the Soviet Union, a development that hastened the rapprochement between the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. These re-alignments naturally affected Greek policy towards Albania; 1961 was also a year of intense activity of the Associations of Northern Epirotes, who felt that the moment had come for the liberation of Northern

Epirus. References to the Greek minority abounded in the Greek press. Athens hinted that it would find some formula for ending the state of war with Albania and extend financial help to the country if a solution to the (minority) issue of Northern Epirus was found.

Greece's interest in the Greek minority in Northern Epirus spurred Skopje to publicize a similar interest in the "Macedonian minority" in Greece; and so, in November-December 1961, Skopje and Belgrade once again raised this issue. Skopje's continual stirring up of a matter for which a compromise solution could have been found, coupled with Yugoslavia's insistence on acting as Skopje's custodian, forced the Karamanlis government to halt the work of the Mixed Committee and unilaterally suspend cross-border communication in December 1961.

While Yugoslav politicians made no new public pronouncements regarding the "Macedonian minority" in 1962, their role was taken up with a vengeance by the press on both sides of the border. The crisis of 1960-62 was brought to an end by the second Averoff-Popović gentlemen's agreement, in December 1962. On the basis of this agreement the two countries could adhere to their respective positions but had to avoid any kind of action that might disturb relations between them.

While the Athens-Belgrade crisis was not serious enough to lead them to break off diplomatic relations, it did have a catalytic effect on the shaping of Bulgarian policy with regard to the Macedonian question. Premier Zhivkov's government, fearing pressure from Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union to recognise a "Macedonian minority" in Bulgaria, officially decided in 1963 that there was no "historic Macedonian nation" and noted that the "Macedonian consciousness" in Yugoslav Macedonia should develop on an anti-Bulgarian basis.

In November 1964 George Papandreou's government reactivated the border agreement, largely because he needed Yugoslavia's support as regards Cyprus. The price he paid for this support was a general tolerance of the activity of the Slav-Macedonians who crossed into Greek Macedonia under the terms of the border agreement. The turbulence in Greek political life in 1965-66 and the ongoing conflict in Cyprus distracted Athens' attention from the Macedonian issue. As long as Yugoslav politicians refrained from making public declarations, Athens could relax.

One of the first actions of the dictatorship proclaimed on 21 April 1967 was to denounce the border agreement. The reason given by the Kollias government for this action (May 1967) was the systematic activity carried out by Slav-Macedonian refugees. The nationalist policy adopted by the Greek dictatorship left no room for discussing a "Macedonian" language or minority.

Nor did the Karamanlis government after the restoration of democracy (1974), and despite Greece's need for Yugoslavia's support on the Cyprus issue, repeat the "mistakes" of 1959. Belgrade, having secured in 1975 a renewal of the agreement on the free zone in the Port of Thessaloniki, did not insist on signing a border agreement. The Macedonian question had become of no more than academic interest in the discussions of politicians on both sides of the border, and the crisis of 1960–62 merely a forgotten flare-up.

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