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## **Interethnic Rivalries and Bilateral Cooperation: Aspects of Greek-Serbian Relations from the Assassination of Alexander Obrenović to the Annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina (1903–1908)\*\***

**Abstract:** This paper seeks to summarize the main aspects of bilateral relations between the Kingdom of Greece and the Kingdom of Serbia during a turbulent period characterized by fierce guerrilla warfare in Macedonia, the efforts made by the Great Powers for the implementation of the reforms provided by the Mürzsteg Program and various domestic changes in both countries.

**Keywords:** Greek-Serbian relations, Macedonian Struggle, Macedonian Question

The annexation of Eastern Rumelia to the Bulgarian Principality in 1885/6 was a major blow to both Greek and Serbian interests as the danger of Bulgarian expansion in Macedonia now appeared real. The case of Eastern Rumelia was seen as an unwelcome precedent that could be implemented in Macedonia as well, if circumstances permitted. The defeat in the Serbian-Bulgarian War of 1885 created an urgent need for the Serbian government to take some measures in order to promote Serbian claims in Old Serbia (i.e., the vilayet of Kosovo) and Macedonia (i.e., the vilayets of Monastir and Thessaloniki). Athens held a prominent position in Serbian plans for two reasons: firstly, because Serbian and Greek statesmen shared the same view on the division of the wider area of Macedonia into spheres of influence, as opposed to the Bulgarian perspective, according to which the contested region should be granted an autonomous status; and secondly, because several Serbian policy-makers strongly believed that their request for the appointment of Serbian bishops in Prizren and Skoplje – so vital to the Serbian national interests – would be met more easily if the Greek government mediated with the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople.

During the 1890s, Greeks and Serbs attempted three times to reach an agreement. The first attempt took place in Constantinople, where the ministers of the two countries to the Ottoman Empire, Stojan Novaković and Nikolaos Mavrokordatos, held negotiations during the summer of 1890. Having failed

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to come to terms, the two countries resumed negotiations in Athens in 1892–93, this time represented by the newly-appointed Serbian minister to Greece, Vladan Djordjević, and Stephanos Dragoumis, the Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Trikoupis government, but once again to no avail. One last attempt to reach an understanding on the delimitation of zones of interest was made in 1899, once again in Athens, by a special envoy of the Serbian government, Milan Milićević, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Theotokis government, Athos Romanos.<sup>1</sup>

Additionally, the Greeks acknowledged Serbian claims to the northern regions with a majority of concentrated Slavic populations, and the Serbs acknowledged Greek claims to the southern zone. Yet, the talks revealed major differences concerning the middle zone, namely the Ohrid–Monastir–Strumica–Nevrokop line.

The Greeks saw the Serbian claims as extensive, unfounded and disproportionate to the dynamics of Serbian influence in the contested provinces. The issue of the demarcation line was directly linked to the Serbian government's request for the appointment of Serbian prelates in Macedonia. According to the rationale of Athens, had the Greek government consented to the Serbian request to appoint a Serbian bishop in Skoplje, the Serbs would have consolidated their position in the entire northern zone, without making the slightest commitment with regard to the middle and southern zones, where Greece maintained serious claims. Therefore, what the Greeks needed to do was to impede the appointment of Serbian bishops in order to gain territorial compensation in the middle and southern zones.<sup>2</sup> Besides, the Greek side remained suspicious

<sup>1</sup> For more on the Greek-Serbian negotiations during the 1890s, see Vladan Djordjević, *Srbija i Grčka, 1891–1893: prilog za istoriju stpske diplomacije pri kraju XIX veka* [Serbia and Greece 1891–1893: a contribution to the history of Serbian diplomacy in the late 19th century] (Belgrade 1923); Evangelos Kofos, "Greek-Serbian relations and the question of Macedonia 1879–1896", in *Greek-Serbian Cooperation 1830-1908* (Belgrade: Institute for Balkan Studies, SASA, 1982), 93–103; Slavenko Terzić, *Srbija i Grčka (1856–1903): Borba za Balkan* [Serbia and Greece (1856–1903): Struggle for the Balkans] (Belgrade: Istorijski Institut, 1992), 299–306, 334–338, 362–364; Dalibor Jovanovski, "Pregovorite pomegu Srbija i Grcija od 1899 godina za podelba na Makedonija na interesni sferi" [Serbo-Greek negotiations in 1899 about dividing Macedonia into spheres of influence], *Godišen zbornik* 56 (2003), 47–56; Mihailo Vojvodić, "Pregovori Srbije i Grčke o Makedoniji 1890–1893" [The negotiations between Serbia and Greece on Macedonia 1890–1893], *Vardarski zbornik* 4 (2005), 13–32; Dušan Bataković, "The Serbian-Greek alliances 1861–1918" (21–64), in *Greek-Serbian Relations in the Age of Nation Building*, ed. Paschalis M. Kitromilides and Sophia Matthaïou (Athens: National Hellenic Research Foundation, Institute of Historical Research, Section of Neohellenic Research, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Αμερικανική Σχολή Κλασικών Σπουδών στην Αθήνα, Γεννάδειος Βιβλιοθήκη, Αρχείο Στέφανου Δραγούμη Ενότητα II, Φάκελος 10: Βαλκανική Συνεννόηση 1886–1896. Υποφάκελος 1 αρ. εγγ. 1981 εμπ., Αθήνα, 13.08.1886, Στέφανος Δραγούμης προς Πρεσβεία

about the Serbian overtures because, as the Greek consuls in the Macedonian hinterland kept reporting, Serbian propaganda in its first steps following the annexation of Eastern Rumelia had failed to win over the Slavic populations that had opted for the Exarchate and embraced Bulgarian national legacies. As a result, the Serbian agents focused their attention on the populations that remained loyal to the Ecumenical Patriarchate,<sup>3</sup> that is to say to the pro-Greek element. Along with the excessive views which had been expressed on several occasions by Serbian intellectuals and politicians, who even laid claim to Thessaloniki itself,<sup>4</sup> such as Milutin Garašanin and Spiridon Gopčević, the Greek policy-makers had been convinced that Serbian activities were more detrimental than beneficial to Hellenism.

To the Serbs, on the other hand, the Greek government's vigorous opposition in the matter of the appointment of Serbian bishops was beyond understanding; as Serbia remained loyal to the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Hence, the Serbian prelates could have prevented the Slavic flock of the Ottoman vilayets from acceding to the Bulgarian Exarchate. In general terms, though, the Serbs attributed this attitude to the arrogance and stubbornness of the Greeks, who dreamt of the restoration of the Byzantine Empire, and to their belief that they were the sole guardians of Orthodoxy.<sup>5</sup>

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Κων/πόλης (αντίγραφο) [American School of Classical Studies at Athens, Gennadius Library, Stephanos Dragoumis Papers (hereafter ASCSA, GL, SDP), Section II, Folder 10 – Balkan Entente (1886–1896), Subfolder 1, no. 1981, Athens, 13.8.1886, Stephanos Dragoumis to Kountouriotis (copy)].

<sup>3</sup> Ίδρυμα Μουσείου Μακεδονικού Αγώνα/Κέντρο Έρευνας Μακεδονικής Ιστορίας και Τεκμηρίωσης (KEMIT), Αρχείο Ευάγγελου Κωφού, ΑΥΕ/1887, αρ. εγγ. 1401 (συνημμένο στο υπ' αρ. 2127, 2157 Υπουργείο Εξωτερικών προς Πρεσβεία Κων/πόλης, 16.11.1887), 2.11.1887, Θεσσαλονίκη, Δοκός προς Στ. Δραγούμη [Museum of the Macedonian Struggle, Research Centre for Macedonian History and Documentation (KEMIT), Evangelos Kofos' Collection, ΑΥΕ/1887, no. 1401 (attached to no. 2127, 2157 Foreign Ministry to Hellenic Legation in Constantinople, 16.11.1887), Dokos to Stephanos Dragoumis, Thessaloniki 2.11.1887].

<sup>4</sup> Υπηρεσία Διπλωματικού και Ιστορικού Αρχείου, Κεντρική Υπηρεσία, Αρχείο Κεντρικής Υπηρεσίας, 1888, ΑΡΧΒ3, αρ. 88, Βελιγράδι, 25.05.1888, Μουσικός προς Υπουργείο Εξωτερικών και αρ. 175, Βελιγράδι, 6.10.1888, Μουσικός προς Υπουργείο Εξωτερικών [Service of Diplomatic and Historical Archives, hereafter SDHA, Central Service Archives, CSA, 1888, ΑΡΧΒ3, no. 88. Belgrade, 25.5.1888, Mousikos to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, no. 175, Belgrade, 6.10.1888, Mousikos to Ministry of Foreign Affairs]. GL, SDP, Section II, Folder 22 – Ambassadors' Reports and Letters, Subfolder 2, no. 154, Mousikos to Stephanos Dragoumis (copy), Belgrade, 13.9.1888.

<sup>5</sup> Such views had been expressed by Stojan Novaković and Vladimir Karić. See more in Konstantin [pseudonym of Stojan Novaković], *Carigradska Patrijaršija i pravoslavlje u evropskoj Turskoj* [The Patriarchate of Constantinople and Orthodoxy in European Turkey] (Belgrade 1895), and Mihailo Vojvodić, ed., *Stojan Novaković i Vladimir Karić* (Belgrade: Clio, 2003). On the ecclesiastical conflicts see also Vojislav Pavlovic, "Orthodox Christianity and

Apart from that, it became obvious during the negotiations in the 1890s that there was considerable divergence as to the spirit of the potential agreement. The Greek side hoped that it would be part of a larger anti-Turkish alliance (including even military action in the long run),<sup>6</sup> while the Serbs were interested mostly in counteracting Bulgarian propaganda in the vilayets of Kosovo, Monastir and Thessaloniki. But the Greek defeat in 1897 ruled out that possibility.

At the threshold of the twentieth century, the situation was partly different. Serbia had achieved several diplomatic successes in Macedonia and Old Serbia, such as the appointment of a Serbian bishop in Prizren (1896). Furthermore, in return for its neutral stance during the Greek-Turkish war of 1897, the Sublime Porte consented to the appointment of the Serbian Archimandrite Firmilian (Dražić) in the diocese of Skoplje and also gave permission for the establishment of Serbian schools in the vilayets of Monastir and Thessaloniki, and of a Serbian consulate in Serres. Upon the resumption of negotiations, in Athens in June 1899, the government of Vladan Djordjević was willing to bargain over those achievements (that is to say, to close the Serbian consulates in Monastir, Thessaloniki and Serres) in order to secure permanent presence of Serbian bishops in the dioceses of Prizren, Skoplje and Debar-Veles. But the Greek side insisted on the closure of the consulates prior to the appointment of Serbian prelates, and the negotiations ended in failure.

Following the heavy defeat in the Greek-Turkish war of 1897, Greece entered a phase of alienation and diplomatic isolation. Thus, the Greek governments sought to maintain friendly relations with the Ottoman Empire in order to be able to cope with the Slavic danger in Macedonia. In the following years a strong anti-Slavic sentiment was fostered in public opinion in Athens, while the stance of the Greek kingdom and the Ecumenical Patriarchate regarding the finalization of Firmilian's appointment aroused considerable discontent in Serbia.<sup>7</sup> What probably was the only point of convergence between the two gov-

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National Rivalries. Relations between Serbia and the Ecumenical Patriarchate in the Vilayets of Kosovo and Monastir 1878-1903". In *Greek-Serbian Relations in the Age of Nation Building*, Athens: 2016, 211-332.

<sup>6</sup> ASCSA, GL, SDP, F. 28-29, subfolder 4, no. 1754, Dragoumis to Mavrokordatos, Athens, 4.8.1890 (highly confidential).

<sup>7</sup> For more about Firmilian's case from the Serbian perspective, see Nićifor Dučić, *Vaseljenska Patrijaršija i srpsko crkveno pitanje* [The Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Serbian Ecclesiastical Question] (Belgrade 1897), and Pavle Orlović [pseudonym of Svetislav Simić], *Skopalsko vlašičansko pitanje, 1897-1902* [The Skoplje episcopal question] (Belgrade 1902), and, from the Greek point of view, see Dimitriou Philippidou, *Το Φιρμιλιάνειον Ζήτημα: ήτοι ο εκ Σερβίας κίνδυνος της Μακεδονίας και του Οικουμενικού Πατριαρχείου και Εθνολογική Μελέτη περί του Βιλαετίου Κοσόβου μετά στατιστικών* [The question of Firmilian, i.e. The Serbian Danger for Macedonia and the Ecumenical Patriarchate and an Ethnological Study on the Kosovo Vilayet including statistics] (Athens 1903).

ernments was their opposition to the idea of an autonomous Macedonia, which had been promoted by various Bulgarian circles.<sup>8</sup>

That was the framework of Greek-Serbian relations when the news of the assassination of the Serbian royal couple in the night of 29 May 1903 (May Coup) reached Athens. It goes without saying that the news made a deep impression on the Greek public. The brutality of the assassination was the main topic in the Athenian press, but it generally attributed the hideous crime to the arbitrariness of the regime, the young King Alexander's scandals and the moral degeneracy of the Obrenović dynasty in general. "The Obrenović went down" was the headline of the newspaper *Akropolis*.<sup>9</sup> "Humiliating and exhausting nations cannot go unpunished", "Peoples do not tolerate corrupt rulers" were some of the comments made in the Greek press,<sup>10</sup> which described the return of the Karadjordjević dynasty to the throne as the beginning of a new era of order, stability and progress for the country. As the Greek minister to Belgrade indicated: "...the nation's dignity had been tarnished by various scandals of the Obrenović family... and this explains the rage with which the appalling crime against the ex-king was committed... the entire Serbian people is celebrating the end of an era of repression and humiliation and looks with certainty upon the new king whose maturity, experience and sweet-tempered character guarantee a better future and prosperity for the Serbian people."<sup>11</sup> Greece quickly recognized the new situation in Serbia. King George I was among the European monarchs who sent congratulatory telegrams to Peter<sup>12</sup> and the Greek /minister to Serbia, Iakovos Argyropoulos, attended the coronation ceremony in September 1904,<sup>13</sup> but these facts were not coupled with a renewed endeavour by the two countries to achieve further understanding.

A few months later, the *Ilinden* uprising, centred on the vilayet of Monastir, inaugurated a new phase of the Macedonian question. The Greek government, assuming that the Ottoman army would suppress the movement, maintained its composure.<sup>14</sup> However, as a result of the turmoil, many Patriarchist

<sup>8</sup> Evangelos Kofos, *Nationalism and Communism in Macedonia* (Thessaloniki: IMXA, 1964), 25–26.

<sup>9</sup> *Akropolis*, 30 May 1903.

<sup>10</sup> See also *Embros*, 30 May 1903, and *Asty*, 30 May 1903.

<sup>11</sup> SDHA, CSA, 1903/6.1.1, no. 171, Argyropoulos to Theotokis, Belgrade, 16.6.1903.

<sup>12</sup> Dragoljub Živojinović, *Kralj Petar I Karadjordjević*, vol. II: *U otadžbini 1903–1914* (Belgrade 2003), 35.

<sup>13</sup> SDHA, CSA, 1904/59.4, no. 208, Argyropoulos to Romanos, Belgrade, 18.9.2004.

<sup>14</sup> Spyridon Sfetas, "Η πορεία προς το Ίλιντεν, ο αντίκτυπος της εξέγερσης του Ίλιντεν στην Ελλάδα και οι απαρχές της ένοπλης φάσης του Μακεδονικού Αγώνα" ["The road to Ilinden: the impact of the Ilinden uprising on Greece and the early stages of the Macedonian armed struggle"], in *Μακεδονικός Αγώνας: 100 χρόνια από το θάνατο του Παύλου Μελά*, Εταιρεία Μακεδονικών

villages were forced to convert to the Exarchate, thus laying bare the danger that had arisen for the unredeemed Greeks of Macedonia.<sup>15</sup> For the political elite in Athens, the *Ilinden* uprising was a clear message that the case of Macedonia would soon be lost unless action was taken.<sup>16</sup>

A similar position was also adopted by the new Serbian government, which after the May Coup had been absorbed in its internal affairs. From the Serbian point of view, the escalation of unrests and armed conflicts between Bulgarian *komitadjis* and Ottoman troops, potentially leading to a war between Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire, was the worst-case scenario. Unofficially, though, some Serbian political and military circles had already begun organizing *četas* (irregular companies). At that stage, recruiting and sending irregulars across the border served only one purpose: to actively show Serbia's interest in the Slavic population of Ottoman possession in Europe and to prevent Bulgaria from monopolizing the role of emancipator. The main exponent of such views was Svetislav Simić, a young diplomat and ardent supporter of Serbo-Bulgarian cooperation.<sup>17</sup> Eventually, the Serbian government was not carried away by those circles that who believed that it was in the Serbian interest that Belgrade should support the insurgents, nor did it deliver demarches to the Sublime Porte.<sup>18</sup>

This position was dictated by the fact that a possible disruption of Serbo-Turkish relations would jeopardize the achievements of Serbian diplomacy in the ecclesiastical and educational fields, as well as by the fear that the turmoil would also spill over into the Kosovo vilayet with unpredictable consequences for its Serbian population. After all, both in Athens and Belgrade, the *Ilinden* uprising was interpreted as a Bulgarian irredentist movement. In autumn the insurrection was suppressed by the Ottoman army, and by the end of the year the Porte accepted a new scheme of reforms inspired by Austro-Hungary and Russia, also known as the *Mürzsteg Program*.

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Σπουδών [The Macedonian Struggle: 100 years from the demise of Pavlos Melas], (Thessaloniki: Society for Macedonian Studies, 2006), 76–77.

<sup>15</sup> Οι απαρχές του Μακεδονικού Αγώνα, 1903–1904. 100 έγγραφα από το Αρχείο του Υπουργείου των Εξωτερικών της Ελλάδος [The origins of the Macedonian Struggle 1903–1904. 100 documents from the Archive of the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs], introduction by Vasilis Gounaris, edited and commented by P. Karambati et al. (Thessaloniki: Museum of the Macedonian Struggle, 1996), 139.

<sup>16</sup> Kofos, *Nationalism*, 33.

<sup>17</sup> For more on Svetislav Simić's views on the question of Serbian-Bulgarian cooperation and the possibility of an autonomous Macedonia, see Vladimir Jovanović, "Svetislav Simić i Makedonski komiteti" [Svetislav Simić and Macedonian Committees], *Vardarski zbornik* 1 (1999), 53–68. Also see Uroš Šešum, *Srpska četnička akcija (1897-1908). Oružana diplomatija*, Matica Srpska, 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Vladimir Jovanović, "Srbija i Ilidenski ustanak" [Serbia and the Ilinden Uprising], *Balcanica* XXIX (1998), 192–195.

In Greece, the reform program was welcomed with some relief insofar as the status quo in the region remained undisturbed and the possibility of an autonomous Macedonia, which in the eyes of the Greeks was equivalent to its ultimate union with Bulgaria, was removed.<sup>19</sup> The program was also accepted by Serbia, on the assumption that its implementation would help to maintain peace and improve the everyday life of local population. Discontent, however, was created by the rejection of the Serbian demand for extending reforms to the vilayet of Kosovo. This fact gave credence to the claim that hiding behind the *Mürzsteg Program* was Vienna's desire to expand its economic and political influence in the region. The Serbian government understood and shared Greek apprehension about the activities of Bulgarian *komitadjis* in Macedonia, but the main source of concern for Belgrade was the possibility of a military intervention of a foreign power in Macedonia and Old Serbia, in this case the Habsburg Empire.<sup>20</sup>

As a result, the friendly overtures of the Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs, Athos Romanos, to the Serbian minister to Athens, Jovan Hristić, immediately after he took up his duties at the end of 1903 and beginning of 1904, went unheeded.<sup>21</sup> Besides, in Serbia's view, apart from the essential reforms regarding the modernization of the Ottoman administration and the reorganization of the gendarmerie, it was also crucial to settle ecclesiastical issues of vital importance to the local population, which had always been the cause of friction between Athens and Belgrade.<sup>22</sup> What the government in Belgrade sought was that the Serbs in the Ottoman Empire be recognized as a distinctive religious community and it resented the attitude of the Ecumenical Patriarch, Joachim III, who, in their view, was favouring nothing else but the Greek cause.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, it was no surprise that, in September 1903, the news that circulated in Athens about the Sultan's *irade* recognizing a Serbian *millet* evoked strong reactions in the Greek press, which spoke of the establishment of a *Serbian Exarchate*.<sup>24</sup>

As far as this question was concerned, the Serbian and Romanian views coincided. Serbian diplomats were therefore paying special attention to the state of relations between Athens and Bucharest, which were deteriorating due to the efforts of the latter to secure recognition of the Koutsovlachs of Macedonia as a

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<sup>19</sup> For an overview of the issue of the *Mürzsteg* reform program, see *Miranda Paximadopoulou-Stavrinou, Η διπλωματία των Δυνάμεων και οι μεταρρυθμίσεις στη Μακεδονία, 1903–1908* [Diplomacy of the Powers and the reforms in Macedonia, 1903–1908] (Athens: Sideris, 2009).

<sup>20</sup> See Wayne S. Vucinich, *Serbia Between East and West: The events of 1903–1908* (Stanford University Press, 1954), 125–130.

<sup>21</sup> *Dokumenti o spoljnoj politici Kraljevine Srbije 1903–1914*, vol. I-1, ed. Andrija Radenić (Belgrade 1991), nos. 453, 466, and vol. I-2, ed. Andrija Radenić (Belgrade 1998), no. 108.

<sup>22</sup> *Dokumenti*, vol. I-2, no. 247.

<sup>23</sup> Bataković, "Serbian-Greek alliances," 57.

<sup>24</sup> *Dokumenti*, vol. I-1, nos. 281, 295, 320.

separate *millet*. It was believed in Belgrade that a possible Romanian success in this matter could set a positive precedent on which Serbian demands could also be based in the future.<sup>25</sup>

In addition, Serbian foreign policy after the restoration of the Karadjordjević dynasty moved in the direction of a political rapprochement with the Slavic states of the Balkans, an idea which was increasingly gaining ground among Serbian policy-makers.<sup>26</sup> Thus in the spring of 1904, with the consent and support of Russia, the dense contacts between Serbia and Bulgaria resulted in the conclusion of a *Treaty of Friendship* and a *Treaty of Alliance* (March-April 1904). These agreements provided that the two states would defend their territorial integrity and national independence; advance the *Mürzsteg* reform program in the vilayets of Monastir, Thessaloniki and Kosovo, and make efforts for it to be extended to the vilayet of Adrianople; prevent the occupation of the four abovementioned districts by any foreign power, a provision which was meant against Austria-Hungary. The treaties also provided for several measures of socio-cultural and economic nature, while the ultimate goal of the two parties was the customs union between the Kingdom of Serbia and the Bulgarian Principality.<sup>27</sup>

Even though the treaties had been kept secret, the Greek government soon found out their content. Paradoxically, the secrecy did not seriously affect Greek-Serbian relations. This was why the Greek minister to Belgrade, Iakovos Argyropoulos, reassured his government that the implementation of any agreement between Serbia and Bulgaria would eventually be hindered by the conflict of their interests in Macedonia,<sup>28</sup> while Greek officials had been constantly pointing out to their Serbian colleagues how hard it was to negotiate with the Bulgarians, stressing at the same time the need for a bilateral Greek-Serbian understanding.<sup>29</sup> As it turned out, the facts proved them right. By early 1906 the Serbs had come to the conclusion that the Serbo-Bulgarian rapprochement had been used by Sofia as a means of exerting pressure on the Ottoman Empire to

<sup>25</sup> *Dokumenti*, vol. I-2, nos. 247, 652.

<sup>26</sup> In late 1903 a circular of the foreign minister says: "Facing the same risks, Serbia, Montenegro and Bulgaria should get rid of political atavism which causes... their eternal rivalry and begin thinking in terms of mutual agreement how to safeguard ... their common interests in the Balkan Peninsula." *Dokumenti*, vol. I-1, no. 387.

<sup>27</sup> See more in Vucinich, *Serbia Between East and West*, 136–144.

<sup>28</sup> SDHA, CSA, 1904-59-4, no. 211, Argyropoulos to Minister of Foreign Affairs, Belgrade, 19.9.1904.

<sup>29</sup> *Dokumenti o spoljnoj politici Kraljevine Srbije 1903–1914*, vol. II-3/II, ed. Liljana Aleksić-Pejković and Života Anić (Belgrade 2003), no. 392. *Dokumenti o spoljnoj politici Kraljevine Srbije 1903–1914*, vol. II-2/I, ed. Liljana Aleksić-Pejković and Života Anić (Belgrade 2006), no. 48.

make concessions in favour of Bulgaria. As the Serbian minister to Athens, Jovan Hristić, aptly put: "...he [the Sultan] is more afraid of Bulgarians than of us. That is why we have always paid the price of our rapprochement, while the Bulgarians have been using it to their own benefit."<sup>30</sup> In essence, however, the main reason why every attempt at a further rapprochement between Sofia and Belgrade became impossible was nothing else but the armed struggle in Macedonia.

According to Article 3 of the Mürzsteg reform program, it was possible to modify the boundaries of the administrative districts "with the view to a more regular grouping of the different nationalities",<sup>31</sup> This provision, rather than appeasing the national rivalries between the Balkan states, had in fact prompted them to carry out even more vigorous propaganda so as to prove that their respective co-nationals made up a majority in the contested areas. Under the given circumstances, following the *Ilinden* uprising and the signing of a Turkish-Bulgarian convention in March 1904, which also provided for general amnesty granted by the Sultan, and the insurgents, prisoners and refugees were free to return to their homes, armed conflicts in Macedonia became inevitable.<sup>32</sup> The circular of the Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs of November 1905 was highly indicative of a shift in the Serbian attitude towards Bulgaria due to these conflicts: "...Bulgarian bands attack Serbian schools and Serbian notables and ask of them to submit to Macedonian (read Bulgarian) komitadjis. Apart from the facts and actions which let on that the bands bearing the Macedonian name are purely Bulgarian bands, we also have in our hands written evidence (which we are sending to you) which indicate clearly and undoubtedly the character of the 'Macedonian' bands. [...] All Macedonian bands support and defend purely Bulgarian schools, and maintain their correspondence in Bulgarian and not in a Macedonian dialect. Additionally, they are in contact with Exarchist officials and force Serbian and Greek communities to convert to the Exarchate. Thus, all these facts and acts are indubitable proof that the Bulgarian bands call themselves Macedonian only to conceal the character of a purely Bulgarian movement and Bulgarian aspirations and that, to them, Macedonia's autonomy means: Bulgarization of Macedonia."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *Dokumenti o spoljnoj politici Kraljevine Srbije 1903–1914*, vol. II-1/I, ed. Liljana Aleksić-Pejković and Života Anić (Belgrade 2006), no. 329.

<sup>31</sup> Douglas Dakin, *The Greek Struggle in Macedonia* (Thessaloniki: IMXA, 1966), 114.

<sup>32</sup> Sfetas, "Η πορεία προς το Ίλιντεν", 82; *Stavrinou, Η διπλωματία, 151–152*.

<sup>33</sup> *Dokumenti*, vol. I-2, no. 556. Even Svetislav Simić himself, who maintained close contacts with the Bulgaro-Macedonian committees, confirmed the latter's adherence to the Bulgarian cause: "Now that the Macedonian Question has entered a political phase, the Exarchate's role has been taken over by the Internal Organization, whose duty is to strengthen and augment, with the means at its disposal, the Exarchate's achievements in the ecclesiastical and educa-

As far as the Greek struggle was concerned, on the other hand, initially the Serbs assessed that Greece was too weak to get involved in an undeclared and unconventional guerrilla war – as the Macedonian Struggle could be shortly described – which could only lead to unwanted complications.<sup>34</sup> Also, based on the outcome of the Greek-Turkish war in 1897, they did not think highly of the military virtues of the Greeks. But the Serbs realized that Greece was a factor to be reckoned with in the long run. This shift is reflected in a report of the Serbian minister in Athens in October 1905: “Although Greece is not ready in military terms, it still is an important factor. Greek population in Turkey must not be underestimated. We must take into consideration that many Greeks hold high positions in the Turkish services and therefore are in contact with imperial deputies and can exert influence upon them. We must also take into consideration that the Greek element is the most progressive and wealthiest among all Christian nationalities in Turkey, that they have a large amount of capital and that in many cities almost all trade is in their hands. Finally, and not only because of our co-nationals in Turkey, we must always bear in mind that the Patriarchate, despite many difficulties and serious blows, still remains a very important factor that must not be underestimated, and a great moral power exclusively in the service of the Greek idea.”<sup>35</sup> We can also argue with certainty that the appearance of Greek guerrillas in Macedonia (known also as *Makedonomachoi*) took the Serbs by surprise. Therefore, apart from the fragmentation and divisions in the ranks of the Bulgaro-Macedonians, one more reason why the activities of the Bulgarian *komitadjis* in 1905–1906 had been limited was the emergence of Greek guerrillas.<sup>36</sup> In a bid to explain the successes of the Greek guerrillas, Serbian diplomats suspected that there was, as a counterbalance to the Serbian-Bulgarian agreements of 1904, a secret Greek-Turkish treaty in force giving the Greeks the freedom to operate almost undisturbed.<sup>37</sup>

Nevertheless, driven by the course of events, the Serbs were more and more convinced of the necessity of cooperation with the Greeks, at least on a local level. By the end of 1906, as the Serbian consul in Bucharest, Mihailo Ristić, pointed out regarding the guerrilla activities in Macedonia, there were two opposing groups, Bulgarians and Romanians on one side, and Greeks and Serbs

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tional fields ... So far has proved that [the Internal Organization] is purely Bulgarian and a tool for the Bulgarization of Macedonia”, *Dokumenti*, vol. I-3/II, no. 214.

<sup>34</sup> *Dokumenti*, vol. I-2, no. 86.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* 466.

<sup>36</sup> *Dokumenti o spoljnoj politici Kraljevine Srbije 1903–1914*, vol. II-1/II, ed. Liljana Aleksić-Pejković and Života Anić (Belgrade 2006), no. 403.

<sup>37</sup> *Dokumenti o spoljnoj politici Kraljevine Srbije 1903–1914*, vol. II-3/I, ed. Liljana Aleksić-Pejković and Života Anić (Belgrade 2003), no. 60; *Dokumenti*, vol. II-2/II, ed. Liljana Aleksić-Pejković and Života Anić (Belgrade 2006), no. 381.

on the other.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, Greeks and Serbs have shown willingness to cooperate.<sup>39</sup> Timing, of course, was not coincidental. Both countries were subjected to external pressure. Greece had broken off diplomatic relations with Romania and had tense relations with Bulgaria due to the pogrom against the Greek communities in those two countries, while the Theotokis government had to cope with unrelenting pressure exerted by the Great Powers to suppress the guerrilla warfare in Macedonia. At the same time Serbia was forced to handle the tariff conflict with Austro-Hungary, also known as the *Customs War* (1906–1911). In these adverse political circumstances both countries proved remarkably resilient. Greek officials kept defending the Greek armed groups in Macedonia as mere self-defence, and refused to depart from their policy on Macedonia. As the Serbian diplomat in Athens Jovan Jovanović observed, those who questioned this “guerrilla policy” risked being cut off not only from their own political parties, but from society itself.<sup>40</sup> Respectively, in Serbia all political parties sided with the Pašić government in order to withstand the Austrian pressure.<sup>41</sup>

In the summer of 1907, the secretary of the Serbian Consulate in Monastir, Sava Tomić, relayed the proposal of the Greek consul in Monastir, Nikolaos Xydokis, for reviving an earlier oral agreement on the zones of influence.<sup>42</sup> Given the circumstances, though, the boundaries should delimit the field of action of Greek and Serbian bands in the *vilayet* of Monastir. In the Serbian view,

<sup>38</sup> *Dokumenti*, vol. II-2/II, no. 459.

<sup>39</sup> Various attempts at a Greek-Serbian approach had been made throughout the period of Macedonian Struggle. See *Dokumenti*, vol. I-2, no. 597, and vol. II-2/I, no. 48.

<sup>40</sup> *Dokumenti*, vol. II-2/II, no. 368.

<sup>41</sup> Vladimir Ćorović, *The Relations between Serbia and Austria-Hungary in the 20th Century*, trans. Dragan Bakić and Stojan Gavrilović (Belgrade 2018), 113.

<sup>42</sup> In late 1901 the consuls of the two countries in Monastir (Bitolj), Stamatios Kiouzes-Pezas and Mihailo Ristić reached an informal three-point agreement, according to which: a) the Greek consul undertook to support the Serbian consul in his efforts to combat Bulgarian propaganda north of Kruševo and Prilep, b) the Serbian consul undertook to support the Greek consul to combat Bulgarian propaganda south of Monastir (Bitolj), and c) both consuls undertook to support each other against the Bulgarians inside the zone Kruševo–Prilep–Monastir (Bitolj). It was a personal agreement which applied exclusively to the educational and ecclesiastical fields in the *vilayet* of Monastir. It is worth mentioning that the agreement was reached without the approval of the two governments and remained in force until Ristić's transfer to Skopje in 1903. Arhiv Srbije, MID, PPO, 1901, 134 (II), no. 664 Mihajlo Ristić to Mihajlo Vujić, Bitolj, 25.11.1901 (copy). SDHA, CSA, 1901.67.3, no. 413, Kiouzes-Pezas to Romanos, Monastir, 18.6.1901 and no. 811 Kiouzes-Pezas to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Monastir, 25.9.1901. It is worth noting also that Pezas referred to this oral agreement as the “scholastic agreement”. For the Pezas-Ristić agreement see also Krste Bitoski, *Dejnosta na Pelagoniskata Mitropolija (1878–1912): Grčki religiozno-prosvetni i vooruženi akcii, Skopje, 1968*, pp. 158–160.

the demarcation line had to be drawn between Kruševo and Prilep in such a way that the northern part of the Morichovo *kaza*, the entire plain of Prilep and part of the plain of Monastir should be incorporated into the Serbian zone. The following part from a report by the Serbian minister in Constantinople, Jovan Nenadović, is enlightening: “The Greeks are well aware that they have no support north of Prilep and Kruševo, and would be glad to start negotiations with us which would also help us consolidate our position in that region if we make several concessions south of this line, where the Slavic element undoubtedly prevails, but there are no conditions for our success.”<sup>43</sup> The agreement was to be applied exclusively on local level and was not to bind the two parties beyond the confined boundaries. With this oral agreement, the Serbian side secured the areas where the Serbian irregular companies (*četas*) were already dominant, while the Greek forces could seamlessly move to the south of this line against the Bulgarian *komitadjis* and the pro-Romanian Koutsovlachs who turned towards the Bulgarian Exarchate.

The Serbs saw this agreement as a gesture of goodwill to the Greek side and the Patriarchate in exchange for the appointment of a Serbian *chorbishop* in Debar, with complete freedom of movement, as auxiliary bishop to the new Greek metropolitan (Parthenios) who was to succeed metropolitan Polykarpos.<sup>44</sup> At a time when Greece was facing diplomatic isolation, the Greek government saw this unofficial Greek-Serbian rapprochement as an opportunity to improve its standing on the Balkan scene.<sup>45</sup> Thereupon it attempted in the next few months to conclude a broader Greek-Serbian understanding based on the spirit of the 1899 negotiations while using the Serbian demands concerning the diocese of Debar-Veles as a starting point. However, the Serbian side had no real reason to enter a new round of negotiations as long as the question of a Serbian *chorbishop* in the province of Debar was still pending.<sup>46</sup>

It seemed that the developments in the aforementioned issue hampered the broadening of the scope of the Pezas-Ristić agreement. The rumours of a Greek-Serbian alliance which had been spread in the spring of 1908<sup>47</sup> should be imputed to Bulgarian diplomacy whose aim was to vilify Greeks and Serbs and

<sup>43</sup> *Dokumenti*, vol. II-3/II, no. 587.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* At about the same time the metropolitan of Debar and Veles, Polykarpos, resigned. Polykarpos was a pro-Serbian Greek clergyman and his resignation complicated things further.

<sup>45</sup> *Dokumenti*, vol. II-3/II, no. 443.

<sup>46</sup> About the diocese of Debar and Veles see also Athanasios A. Angelopoulos, “To επισκοπικόν ζήτημα της επαρχίας Δεβρών και Βελισσού” [The episcopal question of the Debar and Veles province] *Makedonika* 10 (1970), 273–284.

<sup>47</sup> F. R. Bridge, ed., *Austro-Hungarian documents relating to the Macedonian struggle, 1896–1912* (Thessaloniki 1976), no. 342.

justify a new wave of *komitadjis* in Macedonia.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, the fact that both sides acknowledged the importance of a potential agreement and the absence of primary sources confirming clashes between Serbian and Greek guerrillas in the *vilayet* of Monastir may lead us to the conclusion that the two parties reached some form of compromise, probably a non-aggression agreement.

In any case, though, until the events of 1908 (the Young Turk revolution and the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina to Austro-Hungary), Greece had largely restored its image as a credible ally which it had lost after the defeat in the Greek-Turkish war in 1897. The reorganization of the Greek army, a difficult task that was carried out largely by the Theotokis government, and the dynamism shown by the Greek guerrillas during the armed struggle in Macedonia, contributed to this. The Serbs were following the struggle of the Cretans with sympathies, while the Greek press kept a pro-Serbian attitude during the Bosnian crisis.<sup>49</sup> Thus, despite the existing differences on ecclesiastical issues, and despite the fact that there were no close commercial and cultural ties between the two countries, relations between Athens and Belgrade were maintained at a high level.

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<sup>48</sup> *Dokumenti*, vol. III-1/II, nos. 541 and 555.

<sup>49</sup> The case of Antonios Spiliotopoulos and the newspaper *Panellion Kratos* (Panhellenic State) is most characteristic.

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