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## **GREECE AND FYROM: RECENT DEVELOPMENTS AND PROSPECTS FOR BILATERAL RELATIONS**

*by Evangelos Kofos*

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## Introduction

To initiate the members of this seminar to the current developments of bilateral relations between Greece and FYROM, I chose to present, as an introduction, certain excerpts from recent newspaper stories and interviews dealing with the subject. The topic, "Greece and FYROM: Recent Developments and Prospects for Bilateral Relations" is timely, as only a few days ago, FYROM's Foreign Minister Blago Hadzinski visited Athens to hold talks with his Greek counterpart Thodoros Pangalos. This was the first ever official visit to Greece by a foreign minister from the neighbouring country.

Reporting on the outcome of the talks, the daily Kathimerini (24.6.1998) gave a rather accurate assessment of the substance of the meeting:

*"Both sides appraised that the cooperation moves from good to better....The issue of the formal name of FYROM will remain in suspension for sometime...[The two foreign ministers] agreed to leave it to the ongoing UN mediation, although their views are still apart... [Referring to the Kosovo issue] they expressed their worry about NATO's intention to intervene in Kosovo, [a move] that could lead to a general Balkan war. As [FYROM's] territorial integrity is threatened the problem with the name appears to fade in the country".*

Two months earlier, in an interview to Skopje's Dnevnik (11.4.1998), Pangalos, not mincing words, as usually, made the following statement on the name, unprecedented for the Greek position on the name:

*"We need to achieve a compromise for the official name of the country. The solution would not satisfy us fully. It is neither wise nor does it give credit to both of us to continue to live in the world of semiology instead of moving in the world of realism...The problem of the name per se is not of substance but of semantics. We have nothing to divide between ourselves; we have no territorial claims against each other. We have common interests..."*

In response, two days later the president of the VMRO, Ljupco Georgievski, who had inflamed the Greek public in the early 1990s with his irredentist rhetoric, commented (Dnevnik, 13.4.1998):

*"Pangalos responded to the questions addressed to him with the wisdom of Ulysses, the daring of Achilles, the clarity of Plato and the all-inclusiveness of Aristotle. His interview is a historic turn in Greek policy toward Macedonia".*

Back in Greece, Pangalos' quasi "revolutionary" views appeared to receive the tacit approval of certain business and intellectual circles and sections of the press. A characteristic comment by N. Konstandaras, appeared in Kathimerini (27.6.1998):

*"The exploitation of the issue for political ends and the cowardice of the government at the time [1992-1993] which chose to cling to power by following a policy*

*on Macedonia which it knew would be a dead end, conspired to put reason to sleep. And the sleep of reason brings forth monsters”.*

Most, however, were non-committal. In the aftermath of the Hadzinski-Pangalos visit, however, the newly-elected Archbishop of the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Greece, Christodoulos, also not mincing words, declared, while visiting the royal tombs of the ancient Macedonian kings at Vergina (Kathimerini, 26.6.1998):

*“We should show that we are ready to defend our cultural heritage regardless of sacrifices...He who sells off his historical heritage is not worthy of being called a descendant of these ancestors”.*

What made the difference with other similar statements by Greek prelates is that Christodoulos, just three months in office, enjoys a rate of 75% approval in public polls, mainly for his outspoken stand on the issue of Church-State relations, and the “national issues”.

Nevertheless, the most representative account of the current mood of the Greek public, as well as of official Greek policy, was offered by a dispatch of Kathimerini's correspondent from Skopje (22.6.1998):

*“In 1992, at the height of the “Macedonian struggle” [1991-1993], Dionysis Savopoulos [the most popular troubadour, a native of Thessaloniki] had offered this idea as a way out of the impasse: “let us open a supermarket in Skopje”. Today, the big Greek Veropoulos supermarket chain has opened up its first store in Skopje and more will follow. It is a big investment and a proof that close economic relations are the best vehicle in melting the ice”.*

### **Economic and political relations**

Indeed, nowhere has the thaw in bilateral relations been so impressive as in the domain of economic relations. In two years since the normalization of relations, Greece ranks first in investments and third among FYROM's commercial partners (with \$250 m. next to Yugoslavia's \$400m. and Germany's \$338m , 1997 figures). Investment include construction, banking, textiles, foodstuffs, electronic, telecommunications etc. A series of agreements have been signed in various fields, and many more are in line, including important projects in hydroeconomy. Tourism, particularly toward the Aegean tourist reasorts, is rapidly increasing, despite the bureaucratic visa system and the economic difficulties in FYROM

In recent months cooperation has shifted to military cooperation with the participation of FYROM units in NATO/PfP excercises in Greece and Greek units in FYROM.

Immediately after the signing of the New York Interim Accord (September 1995) between the two countries, political consultations were established between the two foreign ministries, which recently were upgraded with visits of the foreign and defense ministers.

### **Greek support to FYROM's international orientations**

More important is the rapprochement of the two countries on major international issues. Greece has endorsed the cooperation agreement between the EU and FYROM as

well as the Joint Declaration for Political Dialogue. Certainly, to reach the EU's prerequisites for membership is an uphill process. Greek officials have served notice to their counterparts in Skopje that much as they would support these efforts, any final agreement of such a nature would require the endorsement of the parliaments of the member-states. With the name issue remaining unresolved, the Greek parliament might prove a serious stumbling bloc, even if the Greek Government gives its consent.

Otherwise the cooperation between the two states connected with EU projects and bilateral undertakings, such as the north-south European route E75, hydro-electric projects on common waters and PHARE programs proceed normally.

Greece also supports the future integration and adherence to NATO of all SE European states, including FYROM. Athens believes that this will enhance overall security in this part of Europe, particularly if Russia's cooperation is secured.

NATO Membership, however, requires that an applicant country should maintain smooth relations with its neighbouring countries. Thus, here again, ratification of the agreement with the issue of the name pending, might raise problems in the Greek Parliament.

### **Greece, FYROM and the Kosovo issue**

Currently, the burning issue in the region is the Kosovo problem. FYROM's government has publicly stated that it would support measures or action taken by the international community (Contact Group, G8, NATO, UN) to prevent further escalation of violence and possibly war in Kosovo. This, after all, is the policy expected of a country which depends much on the international community for its own security and economic and political support.

Nevertheless, its strategic and current needs compel it to communicate its concern against the application of economic sanctions against Yugoslavia, as the repercussion of such measures on its own economy would be serious. On the other hand, it had no difficulty to voice its support to a general embargo on armaments, apparently applied to the Serbian army as well as to the Kosovo Liberation Army. Moreover, it has given—very reluctantly, indeed—its consent to NATO's air demonstrations over its border regions, but it will be hardly happy if it were asked to allow the use of its territory for operations against neighbouring Yugoslavia. This view is shared by all political parties in the country, with the exception of the Albanian ones which, understandably, favour free access to all of NATO's activities against the Serbs. Skopje supports the augmentation of the UNPREDEP and the extension of its mandate. As for the solution of the problem, the Government of FYROM agrees that Kosovo is an internal issue for Yugoslavia, but one with wider repercussions in the wider region. Solution must be found within Serbia and within the borders of Yugoslavia. It asks for the cessation of violence by both the Serbs and the KLA and supports Rugova.

Greece finds itself in almost complete agreement with all these positions. It has even offered to provide a contingent to the UNPREDEP if it is needed. Nevertheless, on the question of "safe corridors" for refugees from Kosovo to be channeled toward the West (Albania) and South (Greece), the Greek government has made it clear that it will not tolerate their entry into Greece, via FYROM. Already, the country has long passed the saturation point with the influx of over half a million of mostly illegal economic and

political migrants from Albania, but also from many Asiatic countries. Pangalos warned Skopje and informed his European partners and the U.S. that any unpleasant occurrences at the border with FYROM would not be Greece's responsibility.

### *The pending problem of FYROM's denomination*

It is well known that the New York Interim Accord of September 1995 normalized relations between the two countries, but left the core issue of the state's denomination to be resolved in new rounds of talks under the auspices of the United Nations and the mediation of Cyrus Vance. The then Greek Foreign Minister, Karolos Papoulias repeatedly stated at the time, that the completion of the negotiations with the settlement of the name issue would be resolved in a short time.

Unfortunately, President Gligorov and his government have procrastinated, for nearly to three years, in the negotiations for finding a compromise solution, despite conciliatory proposals from the Greek side. The present Simitis government has placed an almost complete blackout to the Greek media regarding the ongoing negotiations in New York. Thus, it has managed to keep reaction in Greece at a low ebb. Moreover, by words and deeds, it has passed the message to Skopje that it will not allow the name issue to impede progress in bilateral relations and regional cooperation. Indeed, the ingenuity of diplomats has been taxed to its limits in finding ways to get around the name problem. The practice has come to be known as the "ostrich technique". The interim accord has been signed by two foreign ministers representing "the party of the first part" and the "party of the second part"; in international conferences, country names have been replaced by flags or the names of the chairpersons; in recent joint military exercises officers and men agreed to wear fatigues instead of their formal uniforms because the latter had the name of the country attached to them; and the signposts on the Greek frontier—as well as the Bulgarian frontier, but for different reasons—still point to the "SFR of Yugoslavia"

Such oddities facilitate the day-to-day business, but are thorns obstructing complete normalization of relations. The issue may look and sound as an oddity, even to quite a few Greeks. But in the north, in the Province of Macedonia, where a "Makedonas" (i.e. a Macedonian) refers to two and a half million Greeks inhabiting the Greek Macedonian region, resentment is strong, although just under the surface. It takes a football game or a firebrand speaker—like the new Archbishop Christodoulos—to make popular feelings vocal. It is unfortunate that, while the current Government of Kostas Simitis, with Thodoros Pangalos at the head of the Foreign Ministry, is inclined to meet more than half way their neighbour's positions and have so notified their counterparts, the other side is not yet ready to respond. Understandably, in the face of parliamentary elections in FYROM scheduled for October or November 1998 and presidential elections for next year, one should not anticipate a breakthrough. Given, however, what appears to be the accommodating disposition of the Simitis-Pangalos pair, the two countries might not be presented with a similar opportunity to reach a final adjudication to their difference over the sensitive issue of the name.

Contrary to such developments, President Gligorov chose to deliver, on the eve of Hadzinski's visit, a rather intransigent public speech at Stip. He revealed that his country was considering addressing the UN Security Council with a request to annul its 1993 decision for the temporary name and to replace the denomination "Republic of

Macedonia” for “FYROM”. He also spoke about a “Macedonian minority” in Greece. Both issues are likely to undermine Simitis' efforts and, indeed, to strengthen the "patriotic" wing within the ruling PASOK party as well as the opposition parties.

Anyhow, Skopje has been given the message that even the accommodating position of the present Athens government has its limits; particularly if it will be called upon to support FYROM's upgrading of its relations with NATO and the EU, as both issues would require the endorsement of the Greek Parliament.

### *Other issues*

The surge of Slav Macedonian nationalism, with strong irredentist undertones, which marked the birth of independent state in 1990-1992, has certainly subsided. Irritants, however, persist. One such irritant is the propaganda of certain lobbies of Slav Macedonians, ex-political refugees from Greek Macedonia who reside either in FYROM or are active in the diaspora. Their nostalgia leads them frequently to revive issues of the Greek Civil War. The “open doors” policy pursued by the current Greek Government, however, has helped to keep such issues under control.

Of more concern, however, is what one would term the “national dogma” of “Macedonism”, which permeates the entire educational system of FYROM. The vision of “Greater Macedonia”, is the core of this nationalist approach to history. The new generations are being taught the history and civilization of the entire Macedonian region as part of their patrimony. Moreover, they have been trained to view the whole region as a united ethnological entity, the homeland of the “Macedonian nation”. This, despite the fact that FYROM has jurisdiction over 37,5 per cent of the region--compared to Greece's 51,5%, Bulgaria's 9,5% and Albania's 1,5%--and its Slavic inhabitants have different ethnic origins and/or national orientation from the populations of the regions across the borders.

The school children in FYROM, accustomed to the monopolization of the Macedonian name, have come to believe that “anything” of Macedonian provenance (in the geographic sense), is “Macedonian” in the ethnic sense, as well. Thus, by the interplay of the classical Greek Macedonian name, the geographical Macedonian name, and the ethnic and civic dimensions of the Macedonian name, as applied in FYROM, the youth are sustained in the perception of a national identity which, to a considerable degree, is constructed by the appropriation of elements of the heritage, the identity, and, even, of lands of neighbouring peoples. To the degree that Albanians, Bulgarians and Greeks resist these practices, one might be tempted to recall Samuel Huntington's theory and speak of a mini “clash of civilizations” in the making, in this southern part of the Balkans.

Undoubtedly, other, more critical and pressing developments--such as the Bosnian war and the Kosovo uprising-- have taken precedence. Yet, such intangibles as people's identities, history, names, language, historical personalities and monuments, when unduly or unjustly treated, generate or renew polemics and should be watched, as they provide early warning to developing conflicts.

### **Concluding remarks**

Following the crisis of the years 1992-1995, Greece and FYROM have entered, after the conclusion of the New York Interim Accord, a new phase in their relations, which characterized by the will of both sides to proceed to even closer and mutually beneficially relations.

This is not an ephemeral development. It is not the result of current circumstances. Neither should it be attributed alone to the present political leaders. Rather, it reflects the convictions of both sides that their respective strategic interests coincide in many respects.

Greece, on its part, has no territorial or minority claims vis-a-vis its new neighbour to the north. As a matter of fact, it never had. Even at the height of the controversy over the recognition, Skopje was aware that neither its security nor its territorial integrity were in jeopardy from its southern border. This much could not be said for the other points of its borders, speaking, of course, about strategic, or rather, visionary aspirations.

When the Yugoslav army withdrew from FYROM, in February 1992, following an agreement between Milosevic and Gligorov, it became clear that the umbilical cord linking FYROM to Yugoslavia had been severed. Thus, from a Greek perspective, the prospect that the emerging new state might become an apple of contention by aspiring nationalists in neighbouring countries, could not be disregarded. It has, since, become known that Milosevic had approached Mitsotakis for a joint undertaking toward FYROM. The Greek prime minister not only turned it down, but he also informed some of the European leaders at the time. Also, a year prior to the declaration of independence of FYROM, there was a feeler, from the Bulgarian side, for a joint statement to the effect that Macedonia belonged to the cultural heritage of the Greeks and Bulgarians. It remained unheeded. Lastly, it would be recalled that in the early 1990s there were numerous official and unofficial Albanian statements about the western provinces of FYROM forming part of the "Albanian space". Indeed, there was an abortive idea to carve up an autonomous province, to be given the name of Ilirida.

Under such circumstances, Mitsotakis took the initiative toward the end of 1992 to call on the leaders of all the neighbouring states of FYROM to issue public declarations respecting the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the new neighbour in their midst.

It was apparent, by then, that the Greeks were regarding the independent new neighbour in the role of a buffer. *Mutatis, mutandis*, one might be tempted to draw parallels between non-aligned ex-Yugoslavia's role in absorbing the shock waves of the East-West confrontation in Central Europe, and the current position of independent FYROM as the wind-breaker vis-a-vis the traditional Serbian-Bulgarian feud over the region and the people of Macedonia.

To conclude, it is apparent that Greece has an vested interest in the security and the territorial integrity of that country. It is in this sense, that the overreaction of the Papandreou government in 1994 to impose an embargo on its neighbour in connection with the recognition issue was a serious error, not only in a moral sense, but in terms of Greek strategic interests, as well. For, it undermined the new state to the point that it ran a serious risk of survival. It was fortunate that at that time the KLA had not made its appearance in Kosovo. Otherwise, the spillover of its activities to a weakened FYROM might have had grave consequences.

Cynics, of course, might argue that because of the Greek embargo, FYROM was able to generate much sympathy and the awareness of the international community to its inability to stem off either the spillover of the Yugoslav malaise, or a large scale inter-ethnic crisis within its borders. Thus, international organizations and governments--with the U.S. taking the lead--as well as numerous NGO's rushed in to bolster the economy, the security and the self-confidence of the new state.

Simitis' approach of constructive, business-like relations with FYROM in almost all domains, has been received well by almost all segments of the Greek public, the business community, the political parties, the media and a good part of the intellectuals. This is true also of the Greek public in the northern regions of Macedonia and Thrace. Most business contacts and tourism originate from, or are directed toward those regions, due to proximity. Whatever reservations are voiced they all concentrate on issues either of heritage (the name is just a part) or of propaganda carried mainly by emigre groups of Slav Macedonians residing in FYROM or the diaspora.

On the other side of the frontier, in FYROM, the experience of 2 1/2 years of positive and mutually beneficent relations, has soothened hard feelings generated during the embargo period. Greek officials appear gratified by assurances offered by all FYROM parties competing in the forthcoming parliamentary elections, including the nationalist VMRO, that they view close relations with Greece as a pillar of their country's foreign policy. Greece's stand on the Kosovo issue, as outlined already, compounded by its current state of very good relations with Tirana, certainly augment the feelings of confidence in Skopje. Moreover, various opinion polls show that, as the older generation activists, connected with the secessionist activities of Slav Macedonians against Greece during the Second World War and the Greek Civil War are gradually withdrawing from the political scene, younger generations appear to view positively relations with Greece.

Of course, it would be wrong to paint a too rosy picture, as old stereotype perceptions die hard. Moreover, sensitivities, of the nature already described, have a tendency to resurface, at times with destructive power. It is, however, a fact that today, Greeks of the entire political spectrum, from the Left to the Right, appear keen to assist, and indeed to lobby in favour of the integration of the SE European countries in the European and the Atlantic structures to which Greece belongs. And, FYROM, is certainly included. The mutual interest and the interest of peace and security of the entire region compels the two countries to resolve their outstanding differences in a mutually acceptable manner.