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GREECE AND BULGARIA, 1949-1964:
THE UNSPOKEN ASSUMPTIONS

It took 15 years for Greece and Bulgaria to normalise their relations in the postwar period. This great delay calls for an explanation. Of course, the unfortunate legacy in the history of relations of the two countries and the stagnation of the relevant negotiations on the issue of reparations should, at first sight, be considered enough to provide an answer to this question. Yet, I believe that to provide a full picture of the situation, one has to turn to the perceptions of the statesmen involved. Only this way the difficulties in Greco-Bulgarian relations will be put in the proper perspective. In this paper I do not intend to provide an account of Greco-Bulgarian exchanges in the period under question, but to deal mainly with the perceptions of the Greek side. The Bulgarian one will be dealt with, but in quite a smaller scale.

It may be useful to mention that the two countries resumed diplomatic relations in 1954, after issuing of a joint declaration in Paris. Following this, negotiations were held on the issue of reparations due by Bulgaria according to the 1947 Peace Treaty. Greece refused to agree to an exchange of Ambassadors before the settlement of this question, whereas Bulgaria tried to bring the exchange about, prior to such agreement. This was the point on which the negotiations were stagnated until 1964. Although progress was made on other levels (agreements on the prevention of frontier incidents, expansion of trade, etc), political relations remained rather uncertain¹.

I

The important factor in Greece's Bulgarian policy in 1949-64 is that this period followed half a century of bitter conflicts in the region. Despite some imaginative attempts of Balkan statesmen to overcome the hostilities that divided the Balkan states in 1919-39, conflicts again occurred in 1940-

1. See the joint declaration of 22 May 1954 in Athens, Constantinos G. Karamanlis Foundation, Karamanlis Archive (hereafter KA), file 1, reel 1, 40-41.

45. It is thus extremely important to remember that for the Greeks in the 1950s, the major concern was to defend the country from a legacy which seemed to reproduce itself so regularly, that it not only brought Greek territories under the sword, but also impaired the possibilities of Greek economic development, which was one of the primary targets of any government in Athens after the end of the civil conflict in 1949². Happily, the legacy of conflict in the Balkans was interrupted after the beginning of the cold war; but this was an exceptionally fortunate occurrence. It is possible to suggest that the history of the Balkans in the twentieth century is divided into three periods: 1900 to 1945 is a period of continued conflict; 1945 (1949 for Greece) to 1989 is a period of unimpaired peace; nobody knows what the period after 1989 will bring. As the present study examines the beginnings of the second period, it was natural for the Greek policy-makers to be suspicious of their Bulgarian neighbours: they simply did not have any memories of harmonic co-operation between the two countries— at least not to an extent that would lead them to adopt anything else than a defensive attitude towards Sofia.

On the contrary, the Greeks found it difficult to forget Bulgarian behaviour during the war. The experience of the civil war did not contribute to the creation of confidence on the part of Athens. Immediately after the withdrawal of the Communist forces in 1949, Greece resisted some American attempts to initiate Balkan reconciliation. It was too early for the Greeks to contemplate such a thing³. And the alarm over Soviet intentions which appeared in the West, after the outbreak of the Korean war, drove Greeks and Americans closer with regard to the Balkans: by July 1950, the State Department was afraid of a “Soviet-inspired” adventure in the region, “in the Korean pattern”. Washington then accepted Greek requests to stop the reduction of the Greek armed forces and to review their training and capabilities⁴. It is clear, therefore, that the period under examination started with the worst prospects not only in terms of the legacy of the region, but also in terms of the global political situation.

2. The priority given to economic development by the Conservative governments was indeed a continuation of the policies of the Centre coalition Cabinets in 1949-52. On this, see Ioannis Stefanidis, *United States, Great Britain and Greece, 1949-1952: The Problem of Greek Security and Internal Stability*, PhD Thesis, London University, 1989.

3. Stefanidis, *The Problem of Greek Security and Stability*, 45-48.

4. Memorandum by McGhee to Acheson, 18 July 1950, Washington DC, National Archives, State Department records, Record Group 59, Decimal File 669.81/7-1850 (hereafter Decimal File number only).

II

It has been an axiom in Greek foreign policy in the post-1922 period that the country should avoid isolation in the Balkans. Indeed, Athens's attitude was rather simple: it preferred multilateral co-operation in the region, if all countries could be committed to the maintenance of the *status quo*. Failing this, Greece tended to ally with these countries in the Balkans which are in favour of this *status quo*. This exactly was behind Greece's policy of forming the 1930 axis with Turkey and her espousal of the Balkan Pact of February 1934⁵. In the 1950s, however, the upheaval of the 1940s had not been settled, or, at least, it was too early to expect that the Greeks would regard it as settled. The fact that the Bulgarians had claimed Western Thrace during the Paris Peace Conference (and the fact that Soviets and Yugoslavs had supported such claim)⁶ seemed to confirm the Greek fear that the Bulgarian regime had changed, but the policy had not. True, the Greeks had asked for frontier rectifications in their Bulgarian border, but the Bulgarians kept claiming a *whole* region of Greece and this, from the Greek point of view, was reminiscent of the 1919-1941 period. Indeed, in the face of the memories of the war, such claim added insult to injury for Athens. The fact that Sofia appeared as the champion of Soviet policy in the region, following the Tito-Stalin split, was a further cause for Greek concern, as Bulgaria could now count on super-power support. And, although such reference does not appear in Greek documents, one must take it for granted that Athens had not forgotten that G. Dimitrov, under whose leadership Bulgaria put forward her 1946 claim, was one of the CPB leaders in the 1920s, when the Comintern made its famous ruling on Macedonia⁷. Even if territorial revision were not the aim of the Bulgarian leader, in Athens he was identified with such claims.

In this context, one could hardly expect that in the background of the 1940s and in the face of the strength of the Bulgarian army, Athens would not have such fears. Indeed, during the June 1956 discussions between the Soviet Foreign Minister, Dmitri Shepilov, and the Greek Prime Minister, Constantinos Karamanlis and the Foreign Minister, Evangelos Averoff-

5. Constantin Svolopoulos, "Le Problème de la Sécurité dans le Sud-Est Européen de l'Entre-Deux-Guerres: À la Recherche des Origines du Pacte Balkanique de 1934", *Balkan Studies*, 14 (1973), 247-292.

6. Basil Kondis, "The 'Macedonian Question' as a Balkan Problem in the 1940s", *Balkan Studies*, 28 (1987), 151-160.

7. Evangelos Kofos, *Nationalism and Communism in Macedonia*, (Thessaloniki, 1964), 68-73.

Tossizza, the Greeks brushed aside Shepilov's suggestions to reduce Greek armed forces with the reply that it could not be done, as Bulgaria had occupied Greek territories of Macedonia and W. Thrace three times in a generation⁸.

It was therefore a larger historical context which made the Greek governments quite reserved with regard to their relations with Sofia. In this respect, one has to remember how insecure the Greek frontier was. A glance at the map reveals how far the Greek armed forces would be overstretched and without depth in their defences, in case they had to face a challenge from the country's northern neighbours. Thus, the Greek government in 1950 proceeded to normalise relations with Titoist Yugoslavia: since Tito had been deprived of superpower support after the split with Stalin, he was in no position to pursue territorial revision. In those years Yugoslavia was by definition a *status quo* power in the Balkans and a Greco-Yugoslav rapprochement was natural in the background of the intensification of anxieties after the outbreak of the Korean war⁹.

Simultaneously, the Greek-Turkish relationship offered the prospect of meeting the country's security problem in quite a sufficient way. Greece and Turkey joined NATO in 1952 and the Balkan Pacts between Athens, Ankara and Belgrade were concluded in 1953-4. Thus, the Greeks had at last found a territorial guarantee in NATO, and they ameliorated the question of defence in the operational field, as they now had to cover only the Bulgarian frontier. However, one must not exaggerate the sense of security provided by these developments: Greece had been allied to Turkey in the 1930s too, but she found out that this alliance was of little use during the German attack¹⁰. And one should not forget that alliances do not change geography: the Greek frontier did not stop being (as the Americans put it in the aftermath of the civil war) "indefensible" in case of an all-out Soviet attack¹¹. In the end, the eruption of the Cyprus question and the consequent deterioration of Greek-Turkish relations created a much more difficult situation for Greek defence, as the frontier with Turkey now had to be covered, and this frontier had been demilitarised since there was no challenge from this quarter in the years which followed the Venizelos-Atatürk rapprochement of 1930. Now,

8. Peake to FO, 2 July 1956, London, Public Record Office, Foreign Office records (hereafter FO) 371/123857/11.

9. Ioannis Stefanidis, "United States, Great Britain and the Greek-Yugoslav Rapprochement, 1949-1950", *Balkan Studies*, 27 (1986), 315-343.

10. Constantinos Svolopoulos, "Greece and Its Neighbours on the Eve of the German Invasion of the Balkans, 1941", *Balkan Studies*, 28 (1987), 355-371.

11. Stefanidis, *The Problem of Greek Security and Stability*, 84.

therefore, Greece had to cover *both* the Turkish and the Bulgarian borders.

If this was the framework of general Greek defence considerations, one should not overlook the situation created by the refusal of the Bulgarians to comply with the disarmament clauses of the Bulgarian Peace Treaty of 1947. Greek anxieties are strongly illustrated in documents which are available in the Karamanlis papers. A minute by the Greek Central Intelligence Service (KYP), with no date, but evidently of 1955, pointed to the strength of the Bulgarian army, mentioning the presence of 800 tanks and many operational jets. A Foreign Ministry minute (again of 1955) outlined the Greek worries that Bulgaria was not sincere in her insistence that she claimed no Greek territory any more. The Bulgarian claim on Western Thrace, the extent of Bulgarian armaments ("the most worrying of all"), and Sofia's support to the Communists during the civil war are prominent in this minute¹².

Yet, one should point out to the extremely difficult dilemma with which the Greek policy-makers were faced with regard to the Bulgarian refusal to comply with the disarmament clauses of the Peace Treaty. In 1953, Greece spent 42 percent of her budget for defence. Defence was seen as indispensable to boost morale and a sense of security in the country; economic development would not be possible without this confidence. But it would also be extremely difficult if almost half the Greek budget was used to buy weapons, and this was a major Greek preoccupation throughout the 1950s. Greece faced a vicious circle: without the sense of security, no economic development was possible, and there was no confidence at Sofia's or Moscow's intentions; but if Greece had to pay for her defence, again the economic burden would compromise the possibilities of economic recovery.

Hence the repeated and desperate Greek requests for American military aid in 1953-4¹³. By December 1956, Greece requested more tanks and naval vessels. As the US Embassy in Greece summarised the Greek strategic thesis, "The far greater tank and combat air capability available to Bulgaria means Greece would become a sitting duck in the event of war, committed to a static defence and eventual certain defeat, unless it had the means for counterattack"¹⁴. But Greece could not get this capability for counterattack, to an analogous level to that of Bulgaria, if Athens had to bear the cost alone. In September 1958, a Greek *aide-mémoire* given to the US, noted that Athens

12. The relevant minutes are in KA, file 1, reel 1, 44-47.

13. Athens to FO, 10 March 1954, FO 371/112896/1; Anschuetz (Athens) to State Department, Despatch 208, 26 Aug. 1953, 669.81/8-2653.

14. Penfield (Athens) to State Department, 31 January 1957, 781.5/1-3157.

needed US military aid, or else her financial stability (one of the primary targets of the government) would be destroyed¹⁵. Even in 1961, the US National Security Council (NSC) noted that Greece would meet an attack by Bulgaria or Albania or both, *provided that* the USSR did not participate and Yugoslavia remained neutral¹⁶. These were insecure preconditions however, and inadequate to ease Greek anxieties.

Greece, thus faced a dilemma posed by her defence needs, her economic capabilities and the need to increase trade relations with her neighbours, including Bulgaria. In the end, Athens did not raise the issue of the disarmament clauses of 1947, as it was impossible to force Sofia into such compliance. But the Greek insistence that no exchange of Ambassadors could take place before the settlement of the reparations question, did not derive from financial considerations alone: from the beginning the Greeks regarded the Bulgarian compliance with the reparations clauses as the testing ground for Bulgarian "sincerity"¹⁷. Sofia did not seem to realise this and the negotiations were spun out for years. Looking for this sign of Bulgarian sincerity, and having pointed it out clearly enough, Athens paid little attention to the Bulgarian suggestion in 1959 for the conclusion of a non-aggression Treaty. Foreign Minister Averoff explained the Greek attitude: firstly because if the Bulgarian government refused to give such a sign of sincerity, a pact would be of little, if any, use; secondly, because the Greek government considered this proposal exactly as a means to divert attention from the issue of reparations¹⁸.

However, this is the picture from the Greek angle. There is of course the Bulgarian side of the coin too. In Sofia, the local military superiority of the Balkan Pact powers in 1953-4, was natural to cause alarm. Moscow's backing, in this respect, could only balance the creation of a powerful Balkan bloc enjoying American support. Thus, to a large extent it is possible that the retention of considerable armed forces, even in defiance of the 1947 Treaty, was seen in Sofia as a *defensive* measure, one indeed needed to boost *Bulgarian* confidence thus facilitating economic development, which in the end became the aim of the Bulgarian regime too. Even after the collapse of the Balkan Pacts in 1955, the situation from Sofia's point of view was not much more favourable. The whole thing degenerated into a vicious circle,

15. Greek *aide mémoire* to the US, 1 Sep. 1958, 781. 5MSP/9-158.

16. Washington DC, National Archives, NSC-6101, 4 January 1961: "US Policy on Greece".

17. Galsworthy to May, 24 Sep. 1953, FO 371/107490/10.

18. Sofia to FO, 12 Aug. 1959, FO 371/142921/5; Briggs to State Department, 30 July 1959, 669.81/7-3059.

escape from which was difficult because of the legacy of conflict in the region. It was not, therefore, as Bulgarian statesmen repeatedly said, the presence of "some circles" in Athens which blocked normalisation of relations. For example, in 1956 the Bulgarian Prime Minister, Anton Yugov, published an article in *Bulgaria Today*. He made a very polite reference to the Greek people, insisted that Sofia had no secret designs on her neighbours, but attributed the lack of confidence to some circles in Greece and Turkey. This probably reveals his understanding that ideological rivalries were to be blamed for this lack of confidence¹⁹. Yet, at least so far as Greece was concerned, the process was much more complex and its roots went deeper than that.

III

Up to now, Greek perceptions have been examined in the background of historical legacies, Greek diplomatic priorities as well as Greek defence and economic considerations. The picture, still, would be incomplete without a reference to the general political climate which prevailed in Europe in these years. After all, the 1950s was not the kind of stable period that the 1960s or the 1970s largely were. The impact of the Korean war has been mentioned. The Soviet policy was significantly reformed after the death of Stalin in March 1953 and Bulgaria made its first approach to Athens in the same year. Yet, the power struggle in the Soviet Union did not end before the fall of G. Malenkov in 1955. Thereafter, the Soviets displayed a tendency to come to terms with the Western Alliance, the most remarkable sign being the Austrian State Treaty of May 1955, exactly the same month that the Warsaw Pact was signed. In a strange way, however, Khrushchev's diplomacy tended to frustrate its own efforts. One should remember the November 1958 ultimatum to the Western powers on Berlin and the anxiety it caused, to realise that the situation was not so smooth. Of course, the Soviet leader had his own reasons to want to stop the suffocation of East Germany by West German economic might. Yet, this second Berlin crisis did not end until the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961 and caused prolonged uncertainty in the relations between the two blocs. Equally, these relations were also much strained by the collapse of the 1960 summit. It was in 1962 that the Cuban missile crisis brought humanity in the brink of nuclear disaster.

In this context, Khrushchev's brutal pressure to Greece not to accept

19. Anton Yugov, "To Consolidate Peace in the Balkans", *Bulgaria Today*, No 17 of 1956.

American nuclear weapons in 1959-60 (indeed the Soviet leader made speeches in Albania threatening retaliation) was particularly resented by the Greek government²⁰. It should also not be forgotten that the Greek armed forces were put on alert during the Cuban crisis²¹. Until 1962, therefore, the overall situation was still fluid. As the NSC noted in January 1961, "Greek policy toward the USSR and its satellites in Eastern Europe is based on deep distrust and fear of the Soviet Bloc's policy of alternating threats and blandishments". Furthermore, the NSC continued, Greece had substantially improved trade relations with Eastern Europe, but was also afraid that an East-West *détente* "would result in leaving Greece exposed to Bloc pressures reducing the importance which the Free World attaches to Greece. (...) Greek attitudes toward the Bloc are colored not only by the strength and the proximity of the Soviets, but also by strong, historic animosities toward the Balkan satellites, especially Bulgaria"²². It must be noted that the kind of *détente* Athens was afraid of in the pre-1962 era, was not of the post-1962 kind. After the Cuban crisis, pressure even on small allies of either superpower was excluded as it could lead to war (like the Cuban crisis itself). But this was not a foregone conclusion in the pre-Cuban "thaws". At any rate, the memories of the first half of the century should be seen in the context of the overall international situation when Athens's attitudes are examined.

As a matter of fact, the period from Stalin's death to the 1962 war scare, may be considered as a period of transition: it followed the first intensive period of the cold war (1946-1953), when the two blocs manoeuvred for position after the defeat of Hitlerite Germany; in the same period, indeed, Greece had to fight the civil war, thus becoming the first "limited" battlefield of the cold war, something which left a mark on her perceptions of that latter conflict. The years which followed Stalin's disappearance from the scene, did not mark any major conflict in the international scene. In this period, the west and the new Soviet leadership were busy trying to understand one another. It is in these years, however, that technological advances led to the emergence of the hydrogen bomb and of what was termed the "balance of terror" between the superpowers. The 1962 crisis led to a kind of stabilisation. This stabilisation had the side-effect of easing long-held anxieties in the Balkans and of opening the way for a better understanding between Greece and her Soviet bloc neighbours.

20. Allen to Selwyn Lloyd, 13 Jan. 1960, FO 371/152961/1.

21. Evangelos Averoff-Tossizza, *Lost Opportunities: The Cyprus Question, 1950-1963*, (New York, 1986), 407.

22. NSC-6101, 4 Jan. 1961: "US Policy on Greece".

IV

Cyprus was the last aspect which contributed to the situation. The dispute, certainly, wrecked the Greco-Turkish axis which had formed such pillar of Greek security. At the same time, however, it brought the Greeks and the Yugoslavs closer, since Athens was anxious to keep being a "link" between NATO and Tito, thus developing its role as a NATO power and becoming valuable to the Americans²³. Indeed, in the face of the importance attached to Turkey by the US, a regional role for Greece was needed to balance American preferences for Ankara. At the same time, the Soviet overtures to Belgrade worried Athens, as a Soviet-Yugoslav rapprochement in the years of the Cyprus crisis might bring about the much feared isolation of the country with regard to all her neighbours²⁴. This, too, was a reason why Athens and Belgrade should come closer. And, of course, if a special relationship with "revisionist" Belgrade was so badly needed, Athens was reluctant to put it at stake by coming closer to "Cominformist" Sofia, especially since Athens had the aforementioned reservations with regard to Bulgarian policy.

The Soviet bloc supported the Greek attempts to get a favourable UN Resolution on Cyprus, but this, again, was not much reflected in the relations between Greece and Bulgaria. On the contrary, the fact that the Soviet bloc intensified its efforts to woo Greece immediately after the beginning of the revolt in Cyprus contributed to Greek suspicions that Moscow merely wanted to lure Greece out of NATO, capitalising on the strain to which the relations between Athens and its NATO allies were subjected because of Cyprus²⁵.

The clumsiness of Soviet diplomacy in the Khrushchevite period is vividly displayed by the Soviet effort to blackmail Greece shortly before the UN debate of February 1957. In that month, the Soviet Representative in the UN, V. Kuznetsov, met Averoff and linked the Soviet bloc votes to the state of Greco-Bulgarian and Greco-Albanian relations. Averoff referred to Karamanlis for guidance, suggesting that Athens make progress in Greco-Albanian relations. The Prime Minister refused to do so and instructed Averoff to tell Kuznetsov that if the Soviet bloc voted for Greece, this would create a "favourable atmosphere" for relations with Albania and Bulgaria. The

23. Greek memorandum to Eisenhower's Committee of Advisers, 9 Jan. 1957, KA file 3, reel 1, 642-649.

24. Record of a meeting, 3 July 1956, KA, file 2, reel 1, 341-352.

25. See, for example, FO minute (Galsworthy), 9 July 1956, FO 371/123857/11.

Eastern countries supported Greece in that debate, but the Greek government was very much taken aback by the blackmail²⁶. If nothing else, Averoff's proposal to Karamanlis to make progress with Albania (not Bulgaria) speaks for itself. Indeed, Averoff made a suggestion which was unpopular and might even cost him his career, as he was Deputy for Epirus. Yet, his proposal and Karamanlis's reply display how far the Greek government (in the face of past memories) loathed to be seen to make concessions to Bulgaria under pressure and without having received the assurances about Bulgarian "sincerity" it wanted.

To be sure, there is yet another aspect touching on Cyprus, for which however little evidence exists. The Karamanlis government made significant advances for the increase of trade between the country and the Soviet bloc, but it is debatable how far it could go to the direction of normalising relations with these states, without alienating the Americans and throwing them to the arms of the Turks over Cyprus. It is an indication of this state of affairs that in November 1957 the US *Chargé* in Athens, James Penfield, noted a "softening up" of the government towards "Communists, Communism and the Communist Bloc of states" and a "disengagement" of the country from the "essentially 'American' policy" she followed since 1944²⁷. One should not go as far as suggesting that Greco-Bulgarian relations were one of the numerous victims of the Cyprus question: Greek reserve towards Sofia would have been there even without this dispute. But the complications that Cyprus caused to Greek diplomacy may be usefully taken into consideration.

V

The argument of this paper is that the impact of the divergence of the political systems in Greco-Bulgarian relations must not be exaggerated. It was a mixture of perceptions which was dominant in Greek thinking. The most important of these should be described by the politically more neutral term "defence". In the face of the legacy of the first half of the century, and mostly of the 1941-4 period, the Greek governments' first priority would be to ensure the defence of the country *vis-à-vis* Bulgaria, *even if* there were no communist regime in Sofia. The change of regime in Bulgaria, in 1944, did not create the Greek reserve. But the advent of this regime and its help to the

26. Stephen G. Xydis, *Cyprus: Conflict and Conciliation, 1954-1958*, (Columbus Ohio, 1967), 61-63.

27. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-57*, XXIV, 597-599.

Communists during the Greek civil war certainly left a mark on Greek perceptions, in the sense that it intensified a reserve which would have been there one way or the other. Indeed, the introduction of an element of ideological rivalry between the two regimes, although an important factor, was less important than the fact that Sofia could now count on superpower support. Even on this level, therefore, it was the element of power politics (not so much the one concerning the difference of the political systems themselves), which played the really important role.

As it turned out, it was only after the easing of tensions in Europe as a whole, that the beginning of a new era in Greco-Bulgarian relations was also facilitated. The new period of greater ease came when the Wall had patched up the repeated crises over Berlin (even in the way that it did it) and mostly after the world had felt the breath of the nuclear disaster on its back. Two years after the Cuban crisis, Greco-Bulgarian relations were normalised. Despite the absence of archival material, apart from the impact of the 1962 war-scare, one may distinguish additional factors which facilitated the rapprochement. These were the fact that T. Zhivkov was now firmly on the saddle in Sofia, and as a result Bulgaria was *seen* to be a firm supporter of the *status quo*; the fact that Skopje in the early 1960s had managed to influence substantially Yugoslav policy with regard to the "Macedonian" issue; the fact that simultaneously the new period of Greco-Turkish co-operation had ended amidst the upheaval of the second Cyprus crisis of 1963; and the fact that a new government had appeared in Athens, which, aided by the aforementioned factors, was prepared to make a fresh start in relations with Sofia.

Looking back with the hindsight available to us after almost three decades, we may say that the delay in the normalisation of Greco-Bulgarian relations was perhaps justified in the light of the perceptions of the 1950s, but that it also was unfortunate. Both countries in the end opted for the preservation of the *status quo* and for economic development, and proved strong enough to overcome the legacy of confrontation. For three decades now, good relations between them became one of the most important stabilising factors in South Eastern Europe.