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**The Macedonian Question as Presented in the German Press  
(1990-1994)**

An attempt at a dispassionate analysis of the main features of the journalistic language used in discussing a subject as delicate and emotionally charged as the Macedonian Question has produced the following conclusions.

i) Journalistic discourse becomes disjointed and fragmentary, particularly when dealing with such complex subjects as the Macedonian Question, because it codifies disparate images, opinions, and voices.

ii) Journalists addressing a German-speaking readership on the one hand primarily reflect the pragmatic attitude of the average West European citizen and on the other seek to maximise the chances of their own thoughts' attracting as much reader attention as possible.

iii) Almost none of the German newspapers and periodicals have a permanent correspondent in Greece, preferring to rely either on correspondents in neighbouring countries who are responsible for the whole Balkan Peninsula, or on special correspondents who attempt within a limited time to acquire and convey an understanding of some major issue relating to Greece.

As one browses through German publications that have devoted news items, comments, and articles to the Macedonian Question, three broad categories make themselves apparent. One consists of those published in Germany's economic and commercial centres, which have a nationwide circulation, target the upper and middle levels of the executive, administrative, economic, educational, ecclesiastical, and judicial strata of German society, represent all four major political parties (Christian Democrats, Social Democrats, Liberals, and Greens), and are also well known abroad. These are the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and the *Frankfurter Rundschau*; the Hamburg-based *Die Welt*, *Die Zeit*, and *Der Spiegel*; the Munich papers *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Bayern*

*Kurier* and periodical *Focus*; and the Berlin papers *Tageszeitung* and *Morgenpost*.

The second group consists of the publications based in large and small urban centres (where the vast majority of Greeks in Germany are concentrated) with a very large local circulation. These include the *Stuttgarter Nachrichten* (Stuttgart), *Westdeutsche Allgemeine* (Essen), *Westdeutsche Zeitung* (Düsseldorf), *Hannoversche Allgemeine Zeitung* (Hanover), *Rheinischer Merkur* and *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger* (Cologne), and the *Nürnberger Zeitung* (Nuremberg). The publications in this category, which frequently share the same journalists as those in the first group, reflect at a local level the general perceptions about Balkan affairs of Germany society as a whole.

The third group, finally, consists of the scandal sheets (such as the Hamburg *Bild Zeitung* and the Munich *Abendzeitung*), whose main weapons are pictures, a minimum of text, and simplistic large-point headlines. This analysis concentrates on the publications in the first category, because it is they, with their prestige and wide circulation, that set the general tone.

Before the recent changes in Eastern Europe, the German press made very little reference to Greek affairs. Particularly in the 1980s, German press interest in Greece was confined to the Greek–Turkish disputes over the Aegean and Cyprus. When Greece is discussed in the German press at all it is still largely in the form of travel articles and holiday brochures, because the travel companies have made such an industry out of tourism. The German press promotes a perception of Greece as a vast holiday resort, all sea and scenery, characterful Greek faces and archaeological finds, feeding the unsuspecting German reader a familiar, carefree image of the country. Greece has not yet been a full member of the European Union long enough to change the German tourist's simplistic image and to make people appreciate the country's multidimensional complexity. So the press has tended to focus on scandal and on news stories about the personal foibles of prominent figures, which are all the more fun for their contrast with the average German's generally more conservative view of life. The upshot has been that in recent years Greece has been labelled the *enfant terrible* of Europe, a constant thorn in the Union's side.

A perusal of the articles and reports in the German press on the

Macedonian Question reveals that German journalists:

i) present and analyse the political parameters of the issue with particular emphasis on recent events. They isolate the latest phase of the Macedonian Question and cut it off from its historical background, rarely referring to the ancient period<sup>1</sup> or the events of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Even when reference is made to history, the point of departure is the Balkan Wars and the subject is the Greek army's "conquest" of Macedonia or the division of the region among the victors of the wars.

ii) make almost no reference to archaeological and linguistic data. Like the average West European, the average German journalist has very little notion that classical scholars can help to shape public opinion on matters of foreign policy. The commonly held view is that they should stick to their dusty research.

iii) cultivate sympathy for the FYROM<sup>2</sup>, usually through accounts of traumas suffered by ordinary people, with emphasis on the personal experiences of the journalist concerned (in which case there is often a manifest inability to distinguish between the grosser and more subtle aspects of Balkan humour), accompanied by a string of economic data, all of which has the effect of making Greece out to be the rich, cantankerous, bad neighbour.

The German press tends to focus on the impasse over the name and the international recognition of the FYROM, the minorities in Greece, and the economic blockade imposed by Greece.

The question of the name has virtually monopolised the interest of the German press, whose pages portray it variously as an irrational squabble<sup>3</sup>, something out of the theatre of the absurd, a Greek comedy, an issue characterised by fanatical, hysterical nationalism, and a matter of spurious Greek apprehensions of no real significance<sup>4</sup>.

In the general enthusiasm for defending minorities all over the world, and because the Balkans have always offered a rich harvest of minorities, the German press approaches the Macedonian Question in particular from the point of view of its minority aspects. All sorts of

1. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ)*, 22 January 1993.

2. *Der Spiegel*, 18/1992; *Focus*, 4/1993; *FAZ*, 2 April 1994.

3. *Süddeutsche Zeitung (SZ)*, 15 January 1993.

4. *SZ*, 3 March 1992.

references, facts, and figures are produced regarding minorities in Greece, based either on personal experiences and appraisals arising out of trips to minority areas in Thrace<sup>5</sup> and Western Macedonia<sup>6</sup>, or on interviews and discussions with minority circles, academics, and press correspondents on minority affairs. Particularly negative attention is paid to the absence of recent official data regarding minority groups in Greece and the prosecution, until recently, of all those expressing disagreement with the Macedonian Question and Greece's minority policies. The latter point has afforded some journalists the opportunity to associate Greece with mediaeval practices<sup>7</sup>, with police tactics, and even with the more repugnant members of the international community, such as Iraq.

Lastly, German journalists seem to sum up the whole complex issue of Greece's economic blockade of the FYROM<sup>8</sup> in terms of a thwarted child venting its spleen on a smaller, weaker playmate<sup>9</sup>.

The presentation and analysis of the basic components of the Macedonian Question have inevitably tempted the German press to use the whole issue to paint a more general portrait of Greece as a member of the EU and NATO heading for the twenty-first century.

The portrait involves both general and specific *aperçus* and judgements: as the journalistic lens focuses on one particular detail, which is frequently out of all proportion to the subject under discussion, it is not the actual impression but some aspect of interest to the journalist that emphasises the following angles.

i) The German journalist observes, notes, and is astonished by the Greeks' inordinate attachment to history. Regarding it as an utterly outmoded approach to forging a foreign policy, s/he inevitably questions just how "European" Greek political thinking and practice are. The next step is to accuse Greece of systematically exploiting European institutions and apparatus for its own ends and its own narrow national interests<sup>10</sup>, while making a minimal contribution to the building of the

5. *Die Tageszeitung (TAZ)*, 10 March 1992; *FAZ*, 23 June 1992.

6. *SZ*, 15 January 1992; *Der Spiegel*, 18/1992.

7. *FAZ*, 3 April 1993; *Focus*, 4/1993.

8. *FAZ*, 2 March 1992; 18 September 1992, 28 September 1992, 18 February 1994; *Die Welt*, 18 February 1994.

9. *Die Zeit*, 25 February 1994.

10. *FAZ*, 16 March 1992, 24 March 1992.

New Europe and taking a limited interest in the broader aims and objectives of the organisations to which it belongs. In an age when nations are coming together in pursuit of shared interests, in the eyes of the German journalist Greece is persisting in the outmoded practice of constantly chewing over history and the glory and misfortunes of its illustrious forebears, with the result that it contributes little to the shaping of universal social awareness.

The moment the question arises of Greece's present course within Europe, there is no shortage of even more sweeping, exaggerated judgements to the effect that the Greeks have an inferiority complex and imagine they are constantly under threat from foreign powers, and that modern Greece is a product of European romanticism with no bearing on the situation and events in contemporary Europe<sup>11</sup>.

ii) In view of the issues of the name, the minorities, and the economic embargo, not to mention Greece's perceived pro-Serbian policy<sup>12</sup>, German journalists have spread their judgements even wider and started to present Greece as the main trouble-maker on the Balkan Peninsula<sup>13</sup>, nursing expansionist aspirations against the surrounding area with its arrogant policy towards its smaller neighbours. The deterioration of Greek-Albanian relations<sup>14</sup> has also helped German journalists to reinforce this sort of image by means of generalisations, parallels, and association of ideas. They are then largely held captive by the process of developing the image through the Macedonian Question, which means that they are led heedlessly on to the highly dangerous corollary of blaming Greece for every future irregularity in the Balkans.

Greece's efforts to inform world opinion —particularly during the most critical period of the Macedonian Question in 1992 and 1993— have been based on a strong emphasis on historical arguments, drawn chiefly from the ancient period. This, coupled with the passionate presentation of the Greek position and the inevitable emotional charge it carries, has made it even more difficult for outside observers to understand the Macedonian Question.

11. *SZ*, 6/7 February 1992.

12. *FAZ*, 25 November 1991, 5 January 1992, 18 January 1993, 18 December 1993; *Die Welt*, 17 January 1992.

13. *FAZ*, 11 November 1993.

14. *FAZ*, 25 August 1994, 20 October 1994.

The Germans' failure to be convinced of Greek rights in the Macedonian Question by arguments based on ancient history (to the extent that some journalists openly deride the interplay of historical memory and parentage)<sup>15</sup> is largely attributable to certain factors that are not sufficiently considered in Greece.

Firstly, so-called multicultural pluralism has come very much to the fore in recent years. Efforts are being made, through cultural relativity, to record the achievements of human beings all over the world and treat them as cultural property. There is something of a tendency to sweep aside the established chosen people in the cultural evolutionary process and consequently to take a somewhat negative view of the influence of the Greek spirit of classical antiquity. Furthermore, it has become fashionable to regard the Greek spirit as part of the world culture, and not, therefore, as exclusively Greek.

Secondly, ancient Greek studies continue to be pursued in Germany, but, although they have a great and long tradition there and, like the study of other civilisations, are conducted systematically and methodically in institutes and specialist libraries, in recent years a lack of steady funding has meant that they are either declining or being supplanted by more modern branches of learning.

And if Greece's history-based arguments regarding the Macedonian Question occasionally have difficulty in convincing a German audience of Greece's rights, the general state of the Greek economy and the negative impressions produced by an impulsive, rather than a cool-headed foreign policy, largely incompatible to the West European mind with the capabilities and needs of a small nation, make such arguments even less convincing. Their temperament is such that German journalists focus only on the specific reason that relates to the current events. It a perception entrenched in international diplomacy and indeed has been a fundamental factor in the most glorious moments of Greek diplomacy under that great statesman Eleftherios Venizelos. Being well aware of this West European temperament and perception, in his efforts to bring the Great Powers round to Greece's point of view in 1920, he made it very clear that "we do not speak of historical rights. They have no effect

15. *Der Spiegel*, 18/1992; *FAZ*, 2 March 1992; *SZ*, 6 March 1992; *Die Zeit*, 27 November 1992; *Focus*, 4/1994.

on the Europeans. The term 'Greek rights' is sentimental; the Europeans don't understand it. The correct term is 'Greek interests', which must also be the interests of humankind, not just of Greece"<sup>16</sup>.

It is true that Greece is no longer regarded from abroad with the same exotic romanticism as it was up to the mid-1960s. After the dictatorship fell and Greece began to make overtures to the EEC, the Europeans went into raptures over Greece's return to Europe; but the fundamentally anti-European feeling in Greece in the 1980s paved the way for the present negative attitude to Greek affairs. Once again cumulative memory came into operation, as mounting negative images and accounts afforded excuses to fulminate against Greek policy.

The opening of borders across Europe brought forgotten countries and peoples to the surface, most of them small and weak. It was a fine opportunity for the great protectors. Public opinion in the larger nations has always been sentimentally disposed to favour the small and weak, as long as they are prepared to follow the advice of the large and powerful. In such a vast consumer country as Germany something that is very close but till recently unknown may very easily be regarded as exotic. In this sort of climate German journalists naturally want to wield the pen in defence of a small, weak country like the FYROM, which has no army, is suffering economically, was not involved in the war, and is trying to do precisely what its neighbours have done, i.e. become independent<sup>17</sup>.

When German journalists started to come to Greece to check out the Macedonian Question, historical dreams had just been fulfilled back home that were rapidly overshadowed by the need for enormous economic sacrifices to make them a reality. So these German journalists, who, as taxpaying citizens, were addressing a society that was extremely sensitive to economic issues, expected, after a decade in the EEC, to find a more thoughtful, more performance-oriented Greece, more extrovert and open to Europe. They might have lent a more sympathetic ear to Greece's apprehensions and taken them more seriously had they not been greeted at every turn by the vast, shoddy industry that has been made out of the sacred names and symbols of

16. Eleftherios Venizelos, *Πολιτικάί υποθήκαι*, vol. 2, Athens 1969, pp. 249-50.

17. FAZ, 25 November 1991, 9 April 1992, 1 April 1994.

Macedonia and the kings of the Macedonian dynasty purely for domestic consumption; had they not been peremptorily commanded by signs and leaflets at airports and stations to study Greek history, and dragged round museums and archaeological sites to be shown things they regarded as self-evident —with precisely the opposite effect from that which was intended: i.e. they were forced deliberately to compare that glorious past both with the excessive consumerism, huge foreign debt, stagnant economy, and ecological destruction of the Greece of today and with their own country, which, despite its great economic ease, now seemed poorer as it made sacrifices and struggled to recover from the euphoria of re-unification; had they not been regarded, through the prism of Greek perceptions about the dark dealings of foreigners, as *a priori* antipathetic to Greek affairs; had they, accustomed as they are to more hushed tones, not been so deafened by stentorian bellows of “There is one Macedonia and it is Greek”; had they not heard so much about how necessary Greece is to the survival of its northern Balkan neighbours and had they been able to see more of the loudly vaunted Greek economic penetration of the Balkan interior, particularly the FYROM; had they, finally, realised that as well as paying the price of their own country’s re-unification, in the event of war they would have to lend economic support both to the usurpers of Greek history in the FYROM and to the tide of refugees flooding into Germany.

In conclusion, one might say that the Macedonian Question is not presented in the German press in the way most likely to help one European citizen understand the apprehensions and fears of another European citizen regarding a specific national question. On the contrary, its presentation is more than likely to give rise to further apprehensions about the fate of the highly sought-after *rapprochement* of the European nations in the context of the European Union and to reinforce the popular image of a two-speed Europe.