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**Fragile Balance:
Greek-Yugoslav relations in the period 1944-1946**

In the fall of 1944, the Germans and their allies left the Balkan Peninsula, after their defeat in the majority of the war fronts. For the Balkan peoples, especially those who had fought against the Axis, the future appeared more promising than the present. Expectations had rightfully risen high. However, there were still several unsolved issues. The war had opened wounds that were hard to heal, while the political, social and ideological divisions of the recent past threatened to undermine the precarious peace.

For two of the victors, the Greeks and the Yugoslavs, the post-war period seemed full of challenges. Internal problems, like the issue of the German collaborators during the occupation, the emergence of new political powers, mostly communist, in the battlefields, and the pursuit of a balance in an international environment that was totally different from that of the mid-war years, created the conditions for the enforcement of political and social regimes that differed significantly from those of the recent past.

This paper aims to describe the adventure of the diplomatic and political relations between Greece and Yugoslavia from their liberation, in late 1944, to the summer of 1946. After two stormy and controversial years of tension, when moments of improvement alternated with moments of tension, the relations between the two countries entered a “freezing” stage again for the period 1946-1949. I will support that during that critical period 1944-1946, new players emerged, that affected and were affected by the diplomatic climate in the relations of the two countries. Such players were the communist parties of the period, the refugees from Greek Macedonia and the guerilla groups they organized, and the local political élites that acted mainly in Greek Macedonia and in the People’s Republic of Macedonia. This resulted in a deterioration of the traditional axis Athens-Belgrade that had been forged since the 19th century but mostly since the first half of the 20th century,

which now gains a different dynamic and special characteristics.

In October 1944, the exiled Greek government headed by Georgios Papandreou, returned to Athens. It was faced with many problems, but the most important was the establishment of its power; despite the agreements of Lebanon and Caserta, the Greek Communist Party (KKE) controlled the majority of the Greek hinterland, and it was only the presence of the British in the capital that guaranteed the regime of Athens. The insecurity of the population was particularly prevalent in the north of the country, in Macedonia. There was very little hope of a peaceful period, while numerous signs betrayed that the reopening of the armed conflict was only a matter of time. Armed groups of communist guerillas, but also German collaborators, Slav-Macedonian activists members of SNOF, and men of the regular army, took their positions for a final confrontation, which was soon to come. In December 1944, the clashes of the ELAS forces with the British soldiers in Athens signaled the beginning of the Greek Civil War.

At the same time, the situation in Yugoslavia was no better. Tito's partisans had of course come out of the battlefields victorious and had undertaken the rule of the country. What was more, since November 1943 in Jajce, the second session of the Anti-Fascist Council of the National Liberation of Yugoslavia (AVNOJ) had laid the foundations of federal Yugoslavia. The problems Tito had to face were mainly in the south, Yugoslav Macedonia, where in August 2, 1944, the first session of the Anti-Fascist Assembly of the National Liberation of Macedonia (ASNOM) declared the establishment of the People's Republic of Macedonia and its inclusion in Federal Yugoslavia. However, despite official declarations, Belgrade was faced with the pro-Bulgarian partialities of a large part of the local population in the Skopje region, and Ivan Mihailov's nationalist groups, which struggled for power.

This climate of this general internal uncertainty, the insecurity of the northern Greek provinces and the south Yugoslav regions, and mutual distrust prevailed in Athens and Belgrade after 1944. Despite the fact that both states had fought on the same side in the Great War, the post-war governments were ideologically opposed. The friendly relations of previous decades could not be forgotten overnight, but the new conditions could not be ignored either.

In Greece the views expressed on the relations with Yugoslavia

could be summed up as follows: The Greek government, encouraged by the British and the Americans, sought to smoothen its diplomatic relations with Belgrade, since such a move would rid the country of an external front, and would establish a sense of security. We should also underline, at this point, that Bulgaria and Albania, due to the recent armed conflicts, had very bad relations with Greece. The potential obstacles that the establishment of PRM could raise in the relations between Athens and Belgrade had not yet been perceived. Until the summer of 1945 very few people in Greece had realized what was really happening in the south Yugoslav provinces; it was mostly believed that the "autonomous Macedonian state" was one more Bulgarian stratagem, employed without the knowledge of Belgrade, and that very soon Marshal Tito would dissolve these pro-Bulgarian groups that acted in an irredentist way against Greece. "The Bulgarian hyena", a Thessaloniki newspaper wrote, wished to present the friendly Serbian territories as the loving home of its nameless crimes. But this effort was in vain, since the two nations,

joined in their struggles, their misfortunes and their sufferings, will go ahead united, supporting each other in the Peace conference¹.

Yugoslavia, on the other hand, also desired this improvement in its diplomatic relations with Greece. While the battle for the new government in Athens was uncertain, Belgrade expected a victory of the Greek Communist Party, since they were moving along the same lines ideologically. Tito and his comrades had no scruples about taking sides in the political battle of Greece. For this reason, in an expression of their intentions, the Yugoslav mass media fiercely attacked the Papandreou government, describing it as chauvinist, and accusing it of a terrorist policy against the Slav-speaking populations of Macedonia. Nevertheless, the actions of Belgrade for the support of the Greek communist guerillas were limited and did not materialize, especially after the announcement of the Churchill-Stalin agreement in October 1944 and the Yalta declaration in February 1945, which included Greece in the British sphere of influence.

Since the beginning of 1945, several Yugoslav officials visited Gree-

1. *To Fos*, 18 April 1945.

ce in order to accelerate the economic transactions between the two countries. The commercial attaché of Belgrade, Zitomir Janisić, pointed out enthusiastically after one of his visits to Athens that the economic interests of the two countries coincided and, consequently, he predicted the beginning of broad economic transactions very fast².

However, this euphoria of the first months of 1945 soon proved unsubstantiated, because none of the governments had full control of their territories. On the contrary, centrifugal forces, like the forces of the Greek National Liberation Front (EAM) and the SNOF and later NOF activists in Greece, as well as pro-Bulgarian officials in Yugoslavia and extreme nationalists together with local lobbies proved powerful enough to influence decisively the bilateral relations, thus obstructing the work of the responsible governments. The cause came with the spoils of the war, the national claims rightfully held in Athens and Belgrade since they were both on the victors' camp. On March 28, 1945, the historic newspaper *Makedonia* [Macedonia] published in Thessaloniki re-circulated after a short break during the German occupation. The front page showed a map which presented the national claims of Greece to its north. Based on this map, Greece claimed significant territories from Bulgaria, and northern Epirus from Albania; the most interesting part of the map, however, was that the lands under claim also included regions of Yugoslav Macedonia, and more specifically the region south of Resna and Perlepe, which included the area of Monastir (Bitola) and Strumica. Commenting on this map, the columnist of *Makedonia* observed with conceit:

The Bulgarians and Albanians are our enemies. They cooperated and committed crimes with our enemies ... There can be no discussion with them. We have nothing to say to them. We have nothing to exchange with them. Not even a handshake. And we are not going to ask for their opinion. Together with our Allies let us draw a line on this map, and then go on the site and turn this line into a mountain, a mountain range, the Himalayas made of reinforced concrete, of steel, of bodies, of souls, and build the new Great Wall of China³.

2. *Ellinikos Voras*, 27 March 1945.

3. *Makedonia*, 19 April 1945.

These claims against Yugoslavia were justified as a defensive movement that would help the establishment of national security, since during World War II, the borders with Yugoslavia had been much more exposed and unfortified than the borders with Bulgaria and Albania. The declarations of the newspaper *Makedonia* were not an exception; on the contrary, they largely expressed the views of the entire Greek press, except for the press of the Left. Similar views had been expressed during the German occupation as well; what is more, they were heard from government officials, like the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Philippos Dragoumis, members of the Greek parliament, and personalities outside the parliament, like the Macedonian Georgios Modis, and various organizations mainly of northern Macedonians, like the Irredentist Committees of Northern Greece and Committees of National Rights. The only exception to these claims to the north of the country was KKE. The Greek communists directed national claims mainly to the East, against Turkey, while they were negative to the expansionist plans to the north, which they believed undermined the climate of cooperation that the Balkan peoples, mostly communist, were trying to build.

The Greek Right, (the columnist of the newspaper *Laiki Foni* [The Voice of the People] pointed out), is asking for almost the entire Serbian Macedonia, regardless of the fact that not even a single Greek lives there, or if such a claim would mean war with the regular forces of Tito ... If the Prime Minister, Marshal Tito, and the associates of the Yugoslav coalition of the Left shared the attitude of the Greek Right they would ask for Thessaloniki in return.

The policy of KKE towards Yugoslavia was based on an honest and full-scale cooperation. Moreover, KKE expected the support of Belgrade in order to prevail in the political battle it was giving against the Greek Right⁴.

The column of the newspaper *Makedonia* caused the fury of the other side. A few days later, on April 15, the radio station of Belgrade lashed out against the publication of the map with the Greek national claims. It suggested that the newspaper *Makedonia* was pro-fascist and it predicted that such actions were enough to lead to misunderstandings, even to war.

4. *Laiki Foni*, 6 April 1945.

This temporary tension was momentarily defused, since on April 21, 1945, the Yugoslav Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Stojan Gavrilović, in a letter to the newspaper of the Greek diaspora in New York, *Ethnikos Kiryx* [National Herald], stated categorically that his country had no claims against Greece; he also characterized as irrational the rumours that wanted Yugoslavia to desire the establishment of a Macedonian state that would include Greek Macedonia⁵. Gavrilović's statements were hosted with relief in the Greek press, whose concern for the northern borders of Greece was all the more intensified as rumours mounted about the situation in the People's Republic of Macedonia.

However, it was soon evident that the statements of the Yugoslav Deputy Minister could not cover the smouldering tension between the two countries. Since the spring of 1945, following the Varkiza agreement, but especially since the summer of the same year, the publications in the Greek newspapers of the Left concerning the terrorism of the Right in the rural areas and the persecutions of the Slav-Macedonians in Greek Macedonia took the form of an avalanche.

The persecution of the Slav-Macedonian element is reaching the limits of a real pogrom and it is manifested in multiple and diverse ways,

was the comment of a Greek leftist newspaper; and it added that only in the region of Kastoria there were 600 briefs for 5 thousand Slav-speaking people

indicting them for membership in Ohrana⁶. Moreover, similar accusations were published in the Yugoslav newspapers *Borba* and *Politika*. These accusations forced the Greek Deputy Minister of Press, Mr Zakythinos, to make a statement rejecting the accusations, and referring simply to the departure from Greece of a few hundred Slav-speaking people who were charged with violations of the common penal law⁷.

In response to the statements of Zakythinos, the Yugoslav Ministry of Information stated that due to terrorism in Greece approximately 20,000 refugees, mostly Slav-speaking, had been expelled from Greece and were already in Yugoslavia⁸.

5. *Makedonia*, 22 April 1945.

6. *Laiki Foni*, 30 June 1945.

7. *To Vima*, 4 July 1945.

8. *To Vima*, 10 July 1945.

Tito himself intervened in these developments, and from Bela Crkva he accused the Greek government again of the persecutions against the “Macedonians”; he pointed out that, contrary to the situation in Greece, his country attended to the refugees and offered every possible assistance. His arrows were directed only against the Greek government, which he accused of being in the hands of reactionaries, who persecuted the democratic citizens and the Slav minority. On the contrary, Yugoslavians had nothing to divide with the Greek people, as Tito pointed out, because the Greek people had also fought bravely against its fascist conquerors⁹.

Tito's statements triggered very intense reactions in the Greek press. Numerous articles against the Yugoslav leader were published in Greek newspapers, sometimes with extreme characterizations against him. It was the period of a critical turn in Greek society. People had started to grasp the new state of affairs in Yugoslav Macedonia and Tito's position. This led to a gradual drop of the accusations against Bulgaria as the only one to blame for developments in Skopje, and an increasing awareness of the role of Belgrade in the current situation. At the same moment, the Greek government and the Prime Minister, Petros Voulgaris, were trying to defuse the situation and keep calm. On July 12, Voulgaris stated from Thessaloniki that the Greek people were connected with indissoluble bonds of friendship with the Yugoslav nation and that any misunderstandings would dissolve when proximity talks started. What is more, the Greek Prime Minister had no hesitation in castigating the improper —criminal, as he described it— attitude of the Greek press towards Tito¹⁰.

A few days later, however, in a demonstration for the Greek national claims in Thessaloniki, the crowd hurled abuse at Tito, and threatened Yugoslavia with war. At the same time, the Greek and Yugoslav media accused each other of undermining the bilateral relations of the two countries. These events caused Belgrade to make a representation to the Greek government on July 22¹¹.

A month later, and while the situation was dangerously aggravated,

9. *Makedonia*, 11 July 1945.

10. *To Vima*, 13 July 1945.

11. Department of State (DS) Greece 1945-1949, 868.00/7-2445, Telegram from Kirk to State Department, Cazerta, 24 July 1945, No. 3046.

the USA suggested the establishment of an inter-allied committee which would look into the Yugoslav accusations against Greece, so that the situation was defused¹². This initiative was not realized, since Belgrade wanted this investigation to be held only in Greek Macedonia, while Athens asked for an investigation of the situation in Yugoslav Macedonia as well.

In early September 1945, at a local meeting of the National Liberation Front of Macedonia, the Vice-President of PRM, Lazar Kolisevski, stated that they had to help their brothers in "Aegean Macedonia" in every possible way¹³. At the same time, a demonstration was organized in Monastir "against the persecution of the Slav-speaking population of Greek Macedonia", with speeches from many refugees from Greece; on September 20, the refugees from Greek Macedonia elected a committee which sent a telegram to the government of PRM in Skopje expressing its gratitude for the support it offered to the refugees, and accusing the Greek government of its attitude.

This anti-Greek hysteria culminated on October 11, when Tito in one of his speeches in Skopje addressing a large audience, claimed that the Yugoslav people would never neglect the right of the "Macedonian people" for unity. He also expressed his interest in the fate of the "brothers in Aegean Macedonia", and his intention to defend ardently the principle that "all Macedonians should be united in their own country"¹⁴.

Tito's statements immediately reversed the climate that had been cultivated for a short period by the recent statements of the Vice-President of the Yugoslav government. From London, where he had been at the time for the meeting of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Edvard Kardeli declared that his country had no claims against Greece, and that on the contrary it desired a restoration of close and friendly relations¹⁵.

In such a climate of mutual suspicion, accusations, even insults, Moscow restored its diplomatic relations with Greece in late November of 1945, while England and the USA proceeded to the same action with

12. Foreign Office (FO) 371/48388, Telegram from State Department to Foreign Office, Washington DC, 27 July 1945, No. 5241.

13. *Nova Makedonija*, 6 September 1945.

14. *Makedonia*, 14 October 1945.

15. *To Vima*, 22 September 1945.

Yugoslavia. As a result, in December of 1945 Greece and Yugoslavia proceeded to the exchange of ambassadors. The ambassador of Belgrade to Athens was the Slovenian Izidor Cankar, and the ambassador of Greece to Belgrade was Alexandros Dalietos¹⁶. In a prophetic interview to an Athens newspaper in the first days of his new office in Athens, Cankar, in response to a question concerning the ways to improve Greek-Yugoslav relations, admitted the difficulties; he pointed out that such an improvement could be achieved

if we dismiss the very narrow horizons, if we reject prejudices, if we hinder the dissemination of inaccurate information, if we uproot the chauvinist passions, if we give accurate news, and if we amend any faults we may have made¹⁷.

The re-opening of diplomatic relations, however, had a minimal impact on defusing of the situation. The newspapers of both countries, and the local communities in Skopje and Thessaloniki, never stopped accusing each other. It was evident that the diplomats in Athens and Belgrade did not have the power to reverse an already established situation. This fact was confirmed in the spring of 1946, when the parties of the left sabotaged the elections in Greece. It was soon known that in the Slav-speaking villages of Macedonia there was high abstention in the elections, a fact that rekindled rumours about the participation of many members of the Greek Slav-speaking community in a conspiracy of Serbian and Greek communists for the secession of Greek Macedonia and its ceding to PRM. These rumours were further reinforced when the NOF guerilla groups that repeatedly clashed with the forces of the Greek army operated uncontrollably, outside the framework formed by KKE, and did not hide their alliance with their sympathizers in Skopje. Given the situation, it was not surprising that in the spring of 1946 the Greek press published a series of columns which pressed for a removal of the Slav-speaking population outside the territory of Greece, or their displacement, calling them the Sudites of Greece. They are "snakes", the Greek newspaper *Ellinikos Voras* [Greek North] wrote, and what Greece has to do is gather them up

together with their wives and children, lead them to the

16. FO 371/48390, Leeper to Foreign Office, Athens, 5 November 1945, No. 2227.

17. *To Vima*, 22 January 1946.

borders and send them to Autonomous Vardar Macedonia or their mother Bulgaria.

Another characteristic article was written by Ch. Christidis in the newspaper *To Vima* [Forum] in July 2, 1946; the columnist supported that the

removal of the Slav populations from Western Macedonia is a necessary condition for the securing of peace in the Balkans¹⁸.

The cause for the further deterioration of the Greek-Yugoslav relations came in the summer of 1946. More specifically, on June 22, Dalipis, the General Administrator of Western Macedonia, added fuel to the fire when he published a signed article in an Athens newspaper accusing Yugoslavia, for the first time officially, of conducting undeclared war against Greece¹⁹. The die was cast.

On August 20, 1946, Belgrade recalled its ambassador to Athens, Izidor Cankar²⁰. Cankar visited the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, S. Stefanopoulos, and announced to him that due to the insults against Tito and the Yugoslav government by part of the Greek press, due to the stance of the Minister-General Administrator of Macedonia, Dalipis, and due to the emerging issue of the salvage of the ship "King Alexander", his government had decided to recall him²¹. In answer, the Greek Minister pointed out to the Yugoslav ambassador that regarding the insults against Tito, his government had condemned them in parliament. Moreover, the government had referred to court those newspapers that had misbehaved. Concerning the statements of Administrator Dalipis, Stefanopoulos answered that the Administrator had already been dismissed from the government; he also denied that Greece had sabotaged the sunk Yugoslav ship "King Alexander". In his statements to the representatives of the Press, Stefanopoulos expressed the displeasure of his government for the decision of Belgrade, but he also made it clear that Athens had now fully realized the new situation.

The recalling of the Yugoslav ambassador is part of the carefully organized and persistently pursued campaign of Greece's enemies at the Peace Conference. At other times, the recalling

18. *To Vima*, 2 July 1946.

19. *Nea Alitheia*, 22 June 1946.

20. *Makedonia*, 21 August 1946.

21. *To Vima*, 22 August 1946.

of a Yugoslav ambassador would move and sadden us. Today ... it leaves us indifferent, the Greek Minister underlined²².

These words marked the end of a short chapter in the Greek-Yugoslav relations that lasted for less than two years. Although Athens did not immediately recall its ambassador from Belgrade, the bilateral relations between the two countries were kept at a minimum level. During the following three years, these relations were tried in the furnace of the Civil War, and although there was some improvement later, from the early 1950s onwards, they were not the same any more.

If we attempt an overall assessment of the actions of the two states, we could observe that the post-war period promoted all those elements that were sufficient to annul the age-old Greek-Serbian friendship of the past and turn it into an open conflict. The two governments were ideologically opposed, and the situation was saved only because of the necessity for a more general balance of powers. At the same time, the constant change of government in Greece, the dispute between Tito and Subasić in Yugoslavia, combined with the local characteristics, like the uncertainty for the fate of the northern Greek territories and the pro-Bulgarian trends in part of the population in Yugoslav Macedonia, reinforced the insecurity of the governments and led them to opportunistic policies. Moreover, the overall situation made the governments vulnerable to the irredentist policies of various vain circles which exceeded in patriotism and intolerant hysteria.

The establishment of PRM and the developments in its territory soon became a barometer of Greek-Yugoslav relations. It is a fact that since the end of 1944, a large part of the Slav-speaking population left voluntarily or due to pressures and resorted to Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, mainly in two waves, the first one after the Varkiza agreement in February 1945, and the second after the elections of March 31, 1946. At the end of 1945, the number of Slav-Macedonian refugees from Greece to PRM amounted to 8,500²³.

22. *To Vima*, 22 August 1946.

23. *Archives of Macedonia (Skopje)*, фонд 946: "Список на Бегалците од Егејска Македонија, Настанени во долните околии на Вардарска Македонија" [List of the refugees from Aegean Macedonia who settled in the southern areas of Vardar Macedonia].

Slav Speaking Refugees from Greece to Yugoslavia (end of 1945)

<i>Region</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Children</i>	<i>Total</i>
Skopje	177	54	39	270
Veles	185	151	207	543
Negotino	142	106	184	432
Gevgelje	145	103	103	351
Monastiri	1.000	350	600	1.950
Petrovets	112	128	165	405
Kavadarci	85	84	139	308
Stromnitsa	180	172	170	522
Radovits	103	95	144	342
Agios Nikolaos	115	125	180	420
Stip	125	128	172	425
Kotsani	100	95	142	337
Kumanovo	70	53	65	188
Mazari	65	90	66	221
Tsarevo	17	16	23	56
Tetovo	4	4	1	9
Perlepes	160	155	265	580
Krousovo	92	76	111	279
Monastiri area	420	220	340	980
Vinitsa	27	26	33	86
Total	3.328	2.186	3.150	8.664

A year later, the number of refugees rose to 20,000 people. We should also point out that many of them (approximately 6,000 people) had arrived in PRM through Bulgaria, where they had sought temporary resort. Greece believed that the majority of refugees were members of the Bulgarian Ohrana, and they left to escape their indictment for all their actions during the German occupation. The refugees arrived in PRM in bad condition. It was very easy for NOF to proselytize them and include them in the NOF guerilla groups based in Monastir. From there,

they were again channeled to Greek Macedonia, as guerilla forces now, thus confirming the accusations of Greece for their irredentist activities.

Tito, on the other hand, could not possibly ignore the current situation in PRM. The refugees generated a humanitarian and political problem. On the humanitarian side, both the local government and the central administration in Belgrade attended to the refugees effectively and supported them financially. On the political side, the refugees were a "thorn" in the relations with Greece. The Yugoslav ruler, even if he had the will, could not ignore that fact, since in the period 1944-1946, as we have already said, he had not full control of the local PRM government. Therefore, since he wished to reinforce the pro-Yugoslav trend in the local government, he inevitably exceeded in anti-Greek rhetoric. This attitude kept the refugees satisfied, since they felt protected. But it also satisfied the political leadership of PRM who saw the refugees from Greece in a positive light and with no suspicion at all, because it was believed that they could be easily manipulated, especially in a period when the national feeling of many local inhabitants of PRM had not yet been clarified.

In conclusion, we could claim that the short-lived improvement in the Greek-Yugoslav diplomatic relations in the period 1944-1946 was due to the survival of the pre-war concept of the Athens-Belgrade axis. On the other hand, it was included in the more general regional policy of the Superpowers after Yalta. However, it lacked any ideological convergence. That is why it very soon collapsed, sweeping along peace in the South Balkans.