

Aggeliki Mouzakiti

Reports on Yugoslavia in the Press of Thessaloniki, 1924-1929

In the inter-war period the development of the press of Thessaloniki was remarkable, due to the appearance of new periodicals and newspapers which gradually played an important role in presenting, analyzing and assessing events in Greece and abroad. The unquestionable value of the press as a historical source does not of course reduce the methodological difficulties and peculiarities which should be taken into serious consideration by the researcher, since there are significant differences between the archival material and the press as far as the methodological approach is concerned. Despite the fact that the researcher has to overcome difficulties such as the lack of objectivity, one can derive from the newspapers valuable information regarding various aspects of the economic, social and political life¹. The present analysis is based upon two newspapers, the *Makedonika Nea* and *Efimeris ton Valkanion* for a number of reasons, such as their great circulation, their dominant role in both expressing and influencing the public opinion and their systematic dealing with balkan affairs in the decades that followed the First World War. The newspaper *Makedonika Nea* was in circulation during the period 1924-1934, while the newspaper *Efimeris ton Valkanion* was in circulation during the whole inter-war period. In the articles of both newspapers were generally expressed progressive opinions and ideas on both the internal matters and the foreign affairs².

In the years between 1924-1929, there are in both newspapers extensive reports and articles on Yugoslavia covering three major inter-related issues: Firstly, the domestic policy which the newly-established

1. For a general review of the role of the press in Thessaloniki see G. Anastasiades, "Οι Εφημερίδες στη Θεσσαλονίκη και τα Μέσα Μαζικής Επικοινωνίας (1912-1974)" [The newspapers and the Mass Media in Thessaloniki (1912-1974)], in: *Θεσσαλονίκη, Ιστορία και Πολιτισμός*, ed. by I. Hassiotis, vol. 2, Paratiritis, Thessaloniki 1997, pp. 300-317.

2. *Ibidem*.

multinational state followed and the various problems which came up in building and consolidating a viable political system. Secondly, Yugoslavia's foreign policy towards its neighbouring states and the European powers with vital economic and geopolitical interests in the Balkan area. Thirdly, the specific matters which influenced the course of Greek-Yugoslav relations.

Concerning the first issue, both the *Efimeris ton Valkanion* and *Makedonika Nea* give emphasis on the acute national question, especially the turbulent relations between Serbs and Croats which had a tremendous impact upon the economic, social and political developments and therefore threatened the stability of the state³. More specifically, especially *Makedonika Nea* contains several articles and comments concerning the rivalry between the political parties which were in favour of a centralized form of government and those which favoured the building of a political system on a federal basis⁴. The endless negotiations between the Radical Party of Pašić and the Croat Agrarian Party (Hrvatska Seljačka Stranka) of Radić and their short-term cooperation, Pašić's death in 1926 and the constant demands of Croats for autonomy constituted a crisis which reached its peak by the proclamation of dictatorship on 6 January 1929⁵. The frequency of the reports on the disability of the Yugoslav governments to resolve a multitude of internal problems and the crisis of parliamentarism in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in the 1920s can be attributed to many factors: First of all, regarding the unstable political institutions, there were parallel situations in other Balkan countries and in Greece too. From this

3. The bibliography on the conflict between Serbs and Croats especially in the inter-war Yugoslavia is extensive. Prominent researchers have dealt with this thorny matter in numerous monographs, articles and collective works, in which different approaches and—in many cases—conflicting views are expressed. See for example F. Čulinović, *Jugoslavija između dva rata* (Yugoslavia between the two World Wars), 2 vols., Zagreb 1961; Ljubo Boban, *Sporazum Cvetković-Maček* (The Cvetković-Maček's Agreement), Institut društvenih nauka, Belgrade 1965; I. Banac, *The National Question in Yugoslavia. Origins, History, Politics*, Cornell University Press, London 1984 and Alex N. Dragnich, *The First Yugoslavia. Search for a Viable Political System*, Hoover Institution-Stanford University, USA 1983.

4. *Makedonika Nea*, 8-10-1924 and 11-10-1924. See also *Efimeris ton Valkanion*, 24-6-1925, 6-7-1925, 7-7-1925 and 8-8-1925.

5. *Makedonika Nea*, 26-4-1926 and 12-12-1926, where great concern is expressed about the rivalry between the political parties in Yugoslavia and the critical political situation after Pašić's death.

point of view, they provoked an intense interest in the developments within those countries. Apart from that, due to the traditional greek-serbian friendship which had been forged by important events in the 19th century and the recent memories of the First World War, the press of Thessaloniki indirectly supported anything that represented the so-called *Serbia*: the centralized state mechanism, the Constitutional Monarchy, the Radical Party of Pašić. Besides that, the parallel use of the terms *Serbia* and *Yugoslavia* in the reports indicates the general identification of the greek public opinion with pre-war Serbia. As a result, the greek press viewed the yugoslav state as a kind of continuation of the previous serbian state. The fact that the abolition of the constitution of 1921 in January 1929 was initially met with great suspicion by the press of Thessaloniki indicates both the adherence to the democratic principles and the anxiety about any changes in Yugoslavia's foreign policy. The impression which was created by this dramatic change is quite discernible in *Makedonika Nea* where one can find special lengthy reports on the constitutional developments, the role of the King and the activity of military organizations which by that time had marked to a great extent the history of modern Serbia⁶.

Regarding the foreign policy of Yugoslavia whose official name until 1929 was *Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes*⁷, it should be pointed out that both newspapers provide us with several reports based upon information from the balkan and the european press. The pivotal point of almost all comments and articles concerning this issue is that the complex problems which determined Yugoslavia's foreign policy in the inter-war period derived from its great geostrategic significance. It covered an extensive area in the Western Balkans and bordered on

6. *Makedonika Nea*, especially the issues of January 1929. For the political institutions, the constitutional developments and the role of the King in pre-war Serbia see Alex. N. Dragnich, *The Development of Parliamentary Government in Serbia*, New York 1978 and Dimitrije Djordjević, *Ιστορία της Σερβίας 1800-1918* (History of Serbia 1800-1918), (transl. in Greek by N. Paparothos), Vantias-Institute for Balkan Studies, Thessaloniki 2001, especially pp. 83-97, 161-175, 224-234, 242-248, 252-264, 283-288 and 309-314. On the dominant role of Nikola Pašić in the political scene of Serbia see also Alex. N. Dragnić, *Serbia, Nikola Pašić and Yugoslavia*, Rutgers University Press, USA 1974.

7. The official name of the state changed with the *Decree of the 3rd October 1929* (Zakon o Nazivu i Podeli Kraljevine na Upravna Područja).

seven states, most of which filed several claims for national minorities⁸. Consequently, *Efimeris ton Valkanion* and *Makedonika Nea* placed in the above-mentioned context burning questions which were dominant in the period 1924-1929, such as Yugoslavia's relations with Bulgaria, Albania and Italy. In dealing with Yugoslavia's foreign policy towards Bulgaria, especially in the years 1924-1927, the press of Thessaloniki presents a variety of approaches. More specifically, the comments on the serbo-bulgarian disputes which were caused mainly by the bulgarian propaganda and the frequent attacks of Bulgarian Komitadjis in Southern Serbia were accompanied, on the one hand, by deep concern and sharp criticism on the bulgarian government. Such is the case of *Makedonika Nea* which especially during the years 1924-1925 urges the greek governments to cooperate with Yugoslavia, in order to put an end to the aggressive activity of the Komitadjis⁹. On the other hand, a certain relief is expressed indirectly as long as the tension between the two balkan neighbours does not affect Greece. Indicative of this attitude are the articles filled with stereotypes and feelings of slavophobia which perceive the efforts of reconciliation between Yugoslavia and Bulgaria as an adverse slavic coalition which would turn against greek rights in Macedonia. For example, in *Makedonika Nea* in the issue of June 21, 1927, there is an article which mentions the following: "The rapprochement movement of Serbia and Bulgaria, in favour of which are mainly Croats and Slovenes who do not obtain any previous bad experience with Bulgaria, is probably setting against Greece. However, this would in no way prevent Greece from maintaining the same attitude regarding the conclusion of a Balkan Pact and the greek-serbian negotiations"¹⁰. It is the typical pattern one comes across in several cases, the complex balkan scheme in which Greece, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia

8. On issues such as the frontiermaking and the geostrategic significance of the yugoslav state see Ivo Lederer, *Yugoslavia at the Paris Peace Conference. A study in frontiermaking*, Yale University Press, New Haven-London 1963 and Andrej Mitrović, "The 1919-1920 Peace Conference in Paris and the Yugoslav State: A Historical Evaluation", in: *The Creation of Yugoslavia 1914-1918*, Dimitrije Djordjević (ed.), Oxford 1980, pp. 207-217.

9. *Makedonika Nea*, 20-3-1924, where it is mentioned an agreement between the Greeks and the government of the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes which concerned the cooperation against the Komitadjis, 22-3-1924, 27-7-1924, 6-8-1924, 27-11-1924 and also the issues of March-April 1925.

10. *Makedonika Nea*, 21-6-1927.

function as contradicting parts. Another characteristic example is the article of the issue of October 24, 1927, on a speech of Stijepan Radić, the leader of the Croat Peasant Party who appeals to the Slavs to turn against the common enemies, the Italians, the Greeks and Romanians. Although this speech should be placed within the frame of various sentimental reactions deriving from the italian-yugoslav dispute at that time, one does not have to read between the lines in order to realize that just the quoting of the speech by the newspaper indicates more or less the greek fears¹¹.

The press of Thessaloniki also attached a great deal of importance to the foreign policy of Yugoslavia towards Albania and Italy in the period 1924-1929. Extensive reports on this matter can be found in the issues of both newspapers during the spring of 1927, when the italian-yugoslav dispute over Albania threatened to destabilize the whole area¹². The drawing of the attention of the greek press in general on this matter is justifiable, since the coincidence of Yugoslavia and Greece's interests is obvious. The italian penetration into Albania since 1926 was regarded by the greek press as a major obstacle to the peace and security in the Balkans, since Albania as Italy's satellite could raise claims and provoke problems in Southern Serbia causing a chain of reactions in other countries including Greece. However, the press is also very cautious, as far as the italian-yugoslav dispute is concerned by trying to keep distance from both countries. Both *Makedonika Nea* and *Efimeris ton Valkanion* in their frequent comments and reports on the situation in the summer of 1927 appear to fully back up the policy of neutrality towards the dispute between Rome and Belgrade¹³.

Closely associated with the foreign policy of Yugoslavia, is the third issue, the greek-yugoslav relations in the crucial period 1924-1929, which, as it is evident from the great number of reports and articles, was of utmost importance to the press of Thessaloniki. From 1924 until

11. *Ibidem*, 24-10-1927.

12. *Ibidem*, 22-3-1927 and the issues of April 1927.

13. See for example *Makedonika Nea*, 18-6-1927. For the tense diplomatic relations between Italy and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in the 1920's, especially in the broader context of the french-italian rivalry in the Balkan peninsula see Vuk Vinaver, *Jugoslavija i Francuska između dva rata* (Yugoslavia and France in the inter-war period), Institut za savremenu istoriju, Belgrade 1985.

1928, a series of events and errors in the policy of both sides led to the creation of thorny unsettled questions and caused considerable tension, confusion and misunderstanding in the relations between Greece and Yugoslavia¹⁴. The press of that time, both greek and serbian, played a significant role in influencing the public opinion of both countries. The newspapers of Thessaloniki take a really harsh position showing a great deal of sensitivity towards the matters that hampered a genuine and closer greek-serbian cooperation. In the years 1924-1925, the conclusion of the Politis-Kalfov Protocol, the denunciation of the Greek-Serbian Defence Treaty of 1913 and the raising of excessive demands during the new greek-yugoslav negotiations were the dominant issues in the press. Initially, the press had a more conciliatory approach which probably derives from the fact that the greek politicians were taken by surprise. A case in point is again the *Makedonika Nea* which until spring 1925 expresses serious doubts about the intentions of those who criticized Serbia and appears confident about the signing of the greek-serbian defense treaty¹⁵. A harsher attitude towards Yugoslavia shows *Efimeris ton Valkanion* which contains several articles and opinions especially on the issue of the free zone. The main argument is that the serbian demands for further concessions and facilitations are not related to the economic needs and interests of the yugoslav state but tend to serve an expansionist policy¹⁶. From May 1925 and onwards the *Makedonika Nea* comments harshly on the "irrational serbian demands which are probably culminated by the chauvinist circles in Serbian Macedonia"¹⁷. The constant quoting of the serbian arguments about the need of access to the sea and the importance of the port of Thessaloniki for their trade including the accusations of the serbian press accompanied by the greek

14. For the thorny unsettled questions in the relations between Greece and the Kingdom of Serbs, see Lena Divani, *Ελλάδα και Μειονότητες. Το Σύστημα Διεθνούς Προστασίας της Κοινωνίας των Εθνών* (Greece and Minorities. The International Security System of the League of Nations), Nefeli, Athens 1995, pp. 130-166. See also Iakovos D. Michailidis, "Traditional Friends and Occasional Claimants: Serbian Claims in Macedonia between the Wars", *Balkan Studies* 361 (1995) 103-116.

15. See for example *Makedonika Nea*, 27-11-1924, where the editor accuses "those who have expressed criticism and distrust about the genuine intentions of the Serbs of being totally irresponsible".

16. *Efimeris ton Valkanion*, 25-6-1925, 17-7-1925, 5-8-1925.

17. *Makedonika Nea*, especially the issues of May 1925.

counter-arguments is very usual in the press of that period¹⁸.

The following two years were marked by the signing under the dictatorship of Pangalos of the greek-yugoslav treaties in 1926 which provided the Yugoslavs with extraordinary privileges and afterwards in 1927 by the denial of the greek parliament to ratify them¹⁹. During this period, the press of Thessaloniki, fully aware of the fact that the application of the greek-yugoslav treaties would be detrimental to the greek interests emphasizes the fact that they were signed in a period of internal turmoil. A very characteristic example is the opinion and the comments expressed by the *Makedonika Nea* on this matter: "We are hoping that the Serbs would have a fair and objective attitude realizing that the treaties were signed under unfavourable internal circumstances. The actions of the dictatorship concerning both the internal matters and foreign policy in no way reflect the will of the greek people. Therefore, the ratification of this treaty needs serious modifications and cannot be ratified as it is"²⁰.

The signing of the Greek-Italian Protocol in September 1928 marked a turning point in the attitude of Thessaloniki's press towards Yugoslavia, since it paved the way for negotiations with Yugoslavia and the signing of a Greek-Yugoslav Protocol in spring 1929²¹. During that time the enthusiasm and the jubilant character of the articles was more than obvious especially after the statement of Venizelos that the Serbs

18. See for example *Efimeris ton Valkanion*, 25-8-1925.

19. More specifically, those treaties provided several privileges for the Serbs concerning both the free zone of Thessaloniki and the functioning and administration of the railway line Thessaloniki-Gevgelia. It was obvious that Pangalos was ready to make concessions to the yugoslav state in order to prepare and organize his attack against Turkey. See L. Divani, *op.cit.*, pp. 151-152.

20. *Makedonika Nea*, 9-2-1927.

21. *Makedonika Nea*, 18-9-1928 and 25-9-1928. The Greek-Yugoslav Protocol should be examined in the broader context of Venizelos' efforts to consolidate Greece's international position and establish good relations with Turkey, Italy and the balkan countries. For more details see Evanthis Hatzivassiliou, *Ο Ελευθέριος Βενιζέλος, η Ελληνοτουρκική Προσέγγιση και το Πρόβλημα της Ασφάλειας στα Βαλκάνια 1928-1931* (Eleftherios Venizelos, the Greek-Turkish Rapprochement and the Problem of Security in the Balkans 1928-1931), Institute for Balkan Studies, Thessaloniki 1999, especially pp. 44-53. See also Constantinos Svolopoulos, *Η Ελληνική Εξωτερική Πολιτική 1900-1945* (Greece's Foreign Policy 1900-1945), Estia, Athens 1994, pp. 211-222.

agreed to withdraw all the claims they had raised since 1923²². The orientation towards the reestablishment of the greek-yugoslav relations is encouraged not only by enthusiastic headlines but also by lengthy reports on the visit of Venizelos, his warm reception in Belgrade in October 1928, the celebrations for the 10th anniversary from the break-up of the Macedonian Front which led to the victory of Serbia and its allies accompanied by the vivid descriptions of the city and various pictures related to Yugoslavia. By using these means the press, with *Makedonika Nea* playing again the main role, highlights the transition from the short period of tension in the greek-yugoslav relations to a new era of cooperation and mutual trust. Besides that, the contribution to the revival of the collective memories of the traditional friendship and the common sacrifices serves the intentions of the press to praise and establish Venizelos' foreign policy in the public consciousness. The dispatches from Belgrade of Petros Louvaris, the chief editor of the newspaper in October 1928 are filled with appeals to tradition, symbols and ideals which connect Serbia and Greece²³. Until the signing of the Greek-Yugoslav Convention and the five protocols which are related to the function of the free zone of Thessaloniki the press mainly deals with legal aspects, expressing simultaneously its anticipation for the final resolution of the matter.

As we can see, in the *Efimeris ton Valkanion* as well as the *Makedonika Nea* there are plenty of contradictory approaches, arguments and reports concerning the greek-yugoslav relations. On the one hand, they do not detach themselves completely from the recent past and the pattern of the traditional greek-serbian friendship, as they acknowledge the importance of the greek-serbian alliance. Even in times when the negotiations came to a deadlock, the appeals to the positive common experience did not cease to exist. On the other hand, they resort to sharp and bitter criticism of the serbian demands concerning matters, such as the free zone, the railway line Thessaloniki-Gevgelia and the treatment of the slavophones in Greek Macedonia as a serbian minority, which deeply affected Thessaloniki and the area of Northern Greece. As a consequence, they are involved in a vicious circle of endless arguments,

22. *Makedonika Nea*, 13-10-1928.

23. *Makedonika Nea*, especially 8-10-1928, 9-10-1928 and 12-10-1928.

counter-arguments and accusations with the serbian press. The successful course and outcome of the greek-serbian negotiations in the late 1928 and the beginning of 1929, is viewed as a blessing. The various sentimental approaches which involve appeals to the traditional friendship, hopes and expressions of disillusionment or relief does not prevent Thessaloniki's press from overshadowing them by maintaining a firm attitude as far as the greek rights are concerned.

Apart from the generally similar approach one can also detect a significant difference which has to do with the perception of greek-serbian relations by the two newspapers. *Efimeris ton Valkanion* is focusing on the greek-yugoslav friendship as part of a broader balkan cooperation, whereas the *Makedonika Nea* gives more emphasis on bilateral alliances. These two perspectives reflect different strategic orientations in the exercise of foreign policy in the Balkans. Another relevant difference is the fact that the institutional, political and economic developments in Yugoslavia draws the attention mainly of *Makedonika Nea*, most of the times as a point of comparison with Greece. However, in the *Efimeris ton Valkanion* any domestic development is connected to Yugoslavia's foreign policy within again a general balkan frame.

In conclusion, the analysis and interpretation of the role of the press of Thessaloniki in shaping the general view on Yugoslavia and the greek-yugoslav relations in the years 1924-1929 prerequisites the consideration of four interactive parameters. The first parameter has to do with the fact that the greek press as an integral part of greek social and political life expresses the efforts of the greek politicians to consolidate and strengthen the position of Greece within the balkan and the european context. More specifically, it supports the orientation towards the maintenance of the status-quo, the obedience to the provisions of the international treaties, as well as Greece's accession to bilateral and multilateral alliances which would secure its position in the Balkans. From this point of view, the press regards Yugoslavia as a valuable ally and constantly appeals to the traditional greek-serbian friendship. Moreover, it considers a strong centralized yugoslav state with solid institutions a guarantee for the stability in the balkan peninsula. The second parameter is related to the fluid international scene which is marked by the rivalry between the revisionist and anti-revisionist forces and especially the conflicting interests of France and Italy in the

Balkans. Within that frame, Yugoslavia's foreign policy was of great interest to the greek press, as Yugoslavia was an eager supporter of the french policy in the 1920's. To the fragile coalitions and relations in the Balkans is also linked the third parameter which concerns the constant adjustment of the foreign policy of the balkan states to new tactics. This is quite evident in the press of each country, where one can easily discern contradicting arguments, comments and approaches, both appeals to the need of cooperation in the Balkans and sharp criticism as far as specific thorny matters are concerned. The greek press could not be the exception to the rule. Finally, the fourth parameter has to do with the special case of the press of Thessaloniki, since the public opinion of the city is more susceptible to sentimental approaches in relation to specific matters regarding the city of Thessaloniki and the area of Northern Greece.

With this presentation we have tried to shed light upon only a few aspects concerning the attitude of the greek press towards Yugoslavia during the second half of the 1920s. From our point of view, a systematic and comparative analysis of the greek and yugoslav press would be even more enlightening.