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Perception of the “Neighbour” in Periods of Crisis: The Beginning and the End of the Twentieth Century in Bulgaria and in Greece

After the end of the nineteenth century and in the early decades of the twentieth, the political circumstances constantly fuelled and sustained the latent aggression of the Balkan countries, while their conflicting national interests strengthened their prejudices against one another. The “enemy complex” asserted itself, leading to the development of a notion among the Greeks of a “rival” of almost monolithic proportions, extremely simplistic, and identified chiefly as the “Bulgarian” or the “Turk”.

Starting from the rationale of the rivalry among the Balkan countries, we conclude that the natural reason for this lay in the fact that, at the beginning of the century, Bulgaria was generally perceived to have the fastest rate of economic growth and to be the strongest in terms of military force and the unquestioned leader in terms of its claim to the legacy of Ottoman Turkey. Bulgaria was perceived by its neighbours as the “main enemy” in conditions where national interests not only had no point of contact but openly conflicted, being completely at variance. Bulgaria was also perceived as an “instrument of Panslavism” and as the greatest threat to Hellenism. The Greeks were frightened of this “terrible neighbour”, and with good reason, because they were constantly being reminded that, in view of “Bulgarian rapacity and perfidy”, they should always keep Bulgaria in mind.

The ethnic antagonisms took over the attitudes of the political and cultural élite and shaped its views. Distinct key-words became indelible “valuational labels” for the neighbours in exactly the same way as historiography and some teaching created “codes” to unblock cultivated stereotypical perceptions by simple reference to certain historical dates or events. It is a Panbalkan phenomenon, of which the arsenal of epithets and clichés contains a wide range of expressions: “the Piedmont of the Balkans”, “martyred homeland”, “unredeemed brothers”, “national

ideals”, “defenders of Western Latin culture”.

During the war and the decades which followed, in Bulgaria, as in Greece too, there also appeared a whole crop of memoirs, diaries, artistically adapted notes, travel notes, and ethnological studies on the subject of the neighbour. Some of them, published even while the events were still going on, aspired to raise the Bulgarians’ patriotic morale by emphasising their valour and their successes on the battlefield, in contrast to the indecisiveness, cowardice, or lack of organization of the adversary (neighbour)¹. In most cases, the writers attempt to observe the war operations dispassionately, though this does not mean that they fail to stress that the enemy (in this case the Turk) is a “coward” and “overcome with jealousy” of the Bulgarians’ successes in the field of battle and the “logical victory of the strong over the weak”². Often, the distinction between the warring sides is made on the basis of right and wrong, worthy and perfidious, with the Greeks being the ones described as cunning and perfidious.

In his book, written in 1933, Vasil Uzunov comments on the events of October 1913 as follows:

O Thessaloniki, you invite my pen for the second time! The first time, I wrote about the days when we lived in the glow of golden hopes. Now I shall tell of those dark days when evil winds scattered the laurel crowns we had won in fiery tempests with our blood flowing in torrents, when perfidy proved stronger than the greatest valour³.

Lt.-General Velizar Lazarov, who had been commander of the Bulgarian forces in Thessaloniki in 1913, published his memoirs in Sofia in 1929⁴. He dedicated them to all the Bulgarians who had fallen in Greece in 1913, in the battle for the sacred rights of the Bulgarian race: those killed in battle, those perfidiously put to death, or those were left

1. Podp. N. D. Janakiev, *Karagach-Chongora*, Sofia 1914; Stefan Lozan, *Umirajushta Turtzija. Chetirideset dena ot Balkanskata vojna*. Avtoriziran prevod. Sofia 1913; Zap. poruchik Mitov, *Na vojna c 28-mi Stremski Polk*. Spomeni. Chast I. Podvizi, Sofia 1918.

2. Podp. N. D. Janakiev, *op.cit.*, pp. 130-132.

3. V. Uzunov, *Nie. (Balkanskata vojna - istoricheski roman)*, Sofia 1933, p. 181.

4. Gen.-lejttenant Lazarov, *Balgarskijat garnizon v Solun prez 1913g.* (Spomeni), Sofia 1929.

to die of disease and hunger⁵.

The patriotic fervour, the emotional tension, the certainty of the rightness of their own cause, and the very locutions employed all have their exact counterparts in the Greek publications devoted to the 1912-1918 wars. The terms applied to Bulgarians and Greeks are essentially identical to those found in the comparable Greek sources. The only difference is in the vantage point, which presents the negative characteristics of the Bulgarians mentioned by the Greek writers as positive, and the positive qualities of the Greeks as negative or vice versa.

Thus, the Greek finesse and skill (in the Greek writers) becomes refined perfidy and hypocrisy in the Bulgarian texts. "Barbarity" becomes a characteristic quality of the Greek. The Bulgarian people, who, in the Greek accounts of this period are usually unsophisticated and uncouth, in this case are termed "good" and "guileless", the Greek intelligentsia is "vulgar", while modern Greece "is inhabited by people who are strangers to the virtues of ancient Greece"⁶.

Distrust of the Serbian and Greek allies is strongly expressed, with a marked suspicion of their actions and intentions. Cruelty is a characteristic attributed exclusively to the "other", above all to Turks and Greeks⁷.

The question of the image of the "Balkan neighbour" has another, very important, positive aspect, however. In the case of Greece, efforts were being made to neutralize negative prejudices already in the early twentieth century. The trend began in the context of the educational reforms which began in 1918 under the second Venizelos government and were inspired by the pivotal figure of Dimitrios Glynos. The efforts continued with some interruptions until 1926.

In the last ten years, in the context of a general interest in the subject of the "Other" on the Balkan peninsula, Greek scholars in various disciplines have been showing considerable interest in the question of overcoming negative stereotypes associated with neighbouring peoples. The research conducted by Iliou, Vendoura, Ahli,

5. Gen.-lejttenant Lazarov, *op.cit.*, p. 2.

6. Gen.-lejttenant Lazarov, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-4.

7. V. Uzunov, *op.cit.*, p. 219.

Fragoudaki, Dragona, Koulouri, Belia, Tsandini, and others deals with the role of school textbooks in creating ideas about various historical events and about the “Other” in general, i.e. the “ethnically different”. There is also a trend towards an in-depth exploration of the relationship between ethnocentrism and the education system, and this endeavour unites the forces of scholars in various branches of the humanities⁸.

In Greece, systematic activity is being carried out in this field by the Centre for Research into School Textbooks and Intercultural Education, which is directed by Professor Panayotis Xohellis in the Department of Education of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki.

The activities of Professor Xohellis’s working team are entirely in step with those of the Georg Eckert Institute for International Research into School Textbooks, which was founded in Braunschweig in 1951 in the conditions peculiar to the postwar period, and became the Council of Europe’s Centre for School Textbooks in 1960. Regarding the specific methodology devised by the Greek colleagues and what they have achieved in their exploration of the image of the “neighbour” in the Balkans, it is useful to consult the proceedings (published in 2000) of the international conference held in 1998 on the subject of *The image of the “other”/the neighbour in the school textbooks of the Balkan countries*.

Despite the “institutionalization” of the issue of the image of the Other, regarded as “ethnically different”, progress has by no means been as apparent as one would have expected, or wished. The reason for this lies in the fact that the absence of explicit negative characteristics is not the only factor that determines the creation or the inculcation of ideas (images). The structure and the functions of the narrative (in history textbooks, for instance), like the function of linguistic features (including the mechanisms that lend the text credibility), also shape the suggestions and in the final analysis the reader’s (or the recipient’s) ideas and images. This is the conclusion inevitably reached through a microanalysis of the texts.

8. See *Σχολικά εγχειρίδια Βαλκανικών χωρών*, Thessaloniki 1995; *Η εικόνα του «άλλου»/γείτονα στα σχολικά βιβλία των βαλκανικών χωρών. Πρακτικά Διεθνούς Συνεδρίου, Θεσσαλονίκη, 16-18 Οκτωβρίου 1998*, Athens 2000; E. Konstantinidou, “Οι αλλαγές στα ελληνικά σχολικά βιβλία Ιστορίας: πόσο αποτελεσματικές είναι στη «βελτίωση» της εικόνας του εθνικού άλλου”, *Η εικόνα του «άλλου»/γείτονα*, pp. 375-392.

This is not the most important trend, however—it is probably part of the official approach to the problem. If we move beyond the sphere of research into school textbooks and efforts to improve them (which are an indisputable fact) and turn our attention to other factors and centres of influence that help to form collective prejudices, stereotypes, and images, we note considerable deviations from the line of inquiry followed in the sphere of school textbooks. This is the informal aspect of the issue. If we look at the environment in which prejudices are shaped—i.e. the messages sent out by certain specific sources—we find that school textbooks cannot be expected to assume the mission of “purging” the image of the neighbour of its negative connotations, because they are battling the influence of the mass media (among other things). I do not include electronic media, in order to maintain a certain parity in the choice of the sources on which the following thoughts are based.

I must stress that my own experience has shown that the “collective” image of Bulgaria and the Bulgarians in Greece today is different from that outlined in the first part of this study. It is being increasingly defiled and reduced to the deplorable image of a poor relation who once had pretensions to greatness; it is an image stripped of past fears, which have been replaced with relief by new characteristics based on irony, and even the grotesque.

One might also point out that most of the characteristics of Bulgaria and the Bulgarians in the Greek historical and popular literature of the early twentieth century have proved to be enviably durable, having the capacity to be regenerated today on relatively slight pretexts. “Good neighbourly attitudes” very often turn out to be a circumstantial phenomenon, shaped and further coloured by the Balkan countries’ changing roles in recent years.

The image of Bulgaria and the Bulgarians as part of the collective image of the Balkan neighbour evidently retains some of its basic elements, alongside which certain new characteristics are undergoing a process of endorsement, thus deepening the gulf between Bulgarians and Greeks with such contrasting notions as: rich v. poor, up-to-date v. backward, coarse and boorish v. refined and courteous; a nationality that confers prestige v. a nationality that places one in a different category.

In conclusion, I should like to stress once more that instances of such parallel contradictory trends (phenomena) in the evolution of the image

of the neighbour are not confined to the Greek press. To the contrary, I have noticed that, during the latest Balkan crises, which have been following one after the other in rapid succession for more than ten years now, Bulgarian publications that aspire to reflect the views and concerns of the intelligentsia have been reviving examples, opinions, and even vocabulary from the time of the Balkan and First World Wars.

This trend to a great extent foils any efforts to overcome the negativism that is transmitted and recreated in schools with regard to the Balkan neighbour. And this applies both in Greece and in Bulgaria, where colleagues in the disciplines of history, pedagogics, sociology, and other branches of the humanities have been conscientiously investigating the subject of the “Other” in school textbooks since 1990.

I should like to conclude with a quotation from Ljuben Karavelov, a Bulgarian thinker and writer who was closely involved in the cultural and revolutionary developments in the Balkans in the second half of the nineteenth century:

“We have to realize that we cannot get along without one another, neither the Serb without the Bulgarian, nor the Bulgarian without the Romanian. The nation that thinks it can exploit the weaknesses of its brother and ally, use him as a means of achieving its own ends, and then abandon him will not prosper. He who seeks to take from others loses what he has”⁹.

9. L. Karavelov, *Kreditat na Napoleon pada*, (n.p.) 1870. The quotation comes from Velichko Todorov, “*Znam gi az tia!*” *Sarbia I sarbite v balgarskata literatura* (“I know them!”: Serbia and the Serbs in Bulgarian literature), Sofia 2000, p. 75.