

FRIENDLY COMPETITION – GREEK-SERBIAN RELATIONS AND OTTOMAN MACEDONIA IN THE EIGHTIES OF THE 19TH CENTURY

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the contacts between two Balkan states - Serbia and Greece and their proper attempt to reach an agreement on the division of the Ottoman Macedonia into spheres of interest. The talks of the two countries, that had an alliance agreement as of 1867, were taking place on several levels. Officially between diplomats and politicians and unofficially between diplomats and intellectuals. Although in Greece it was considered that some kind of an agreement could be reached with Serbia over Macedonia, given the weaker position of the Serbian side, the initial findings of the research show that it was very difficult. Both sides had claims to the same region. Athens initially thought that Serbian claims did not relate to those parts of Macedonia to which Greece had claims, but quickly found that the interests of Serbs entered much more to the south than Greek expectations. On the other hand, Belgrade was aware that Serbia's interests would not be realised if they did not have some agreement with Greece. Both sides were friendly toward one another, but their interests were different and competitive.

Keywords: GREECE, SERBIA, MACEDONIA, NEGOTIATIONS, SPHERES OF INTEREST

When in the first half of 1882 Trikoupis came to power, he had to face the fact that his country in the Balkans was alone, without allies (Ναλτσα, 120). He faced two options. One was an alliance with the Slavs against the Ottoman Empire. At the beginning of 1882 he had a chance to show whether he was in favour of that cooperation. Namely, the Montenegrin Prince Nikola proposed to Athens the creation of anti-Ottoman alliance that would include Greece, Bulgaria, Romania and Montenegro. The Greek government did not accept that despite the offer that the Greek King Georgios lead the alliance (Driault et Lheritier, 178). In addition, he soon did not accept Serbian proposals either, despite the inclination of the Greek king, for creating an anti-Ottoman alliance. This shows that Trikoupis simply did not believe in an alliance with the Slavs. However, on the other hand, he would not afford himself to not have good relations with the Slavic countries, especially Serbia. But the Serbs also had claims to Ottoman Macedonia. Serbian claims to Ottoman Macedonia are well described by the eminent Serbian geographer and diplomat Vladimir Karic. In his book *Srpska zemlja*, published in

Belgrade in 1882, he wrote about "Serbian Macedonia." According to him, in the south the "Serbian Macedonia" was composed of two areas – Thessaloniki and Bitola areas (Војводић, 30). For us, in view of the topic it is of interest to note that Bitola area, according to Karic, included the districts "Bitola, Kichevo, Reshnja, Prespa, Ohrid and Florina; to the west the border extended along Crn Drim and the mountains on the west coast of Prespa and Ohrid Lakes" (Војводић, 30). The description of Karic, which somehow delineated the initial Serbian claims in Ottoman Macedonia, was in contradiction with the new line of Greek territorial claims in the said region. In the early eighties of the 19th century, under the influence of Konstantinos Paparrigopoulos and Syllogos to spread the Greek literacy, a line was drawn that began from Ohrid Lake and ran through Bitola and Strumica, ending in Nevrokop (Јовановски, 2007, Јовановски, 2013).

Karic draw the contours of Serbian claims in Ottoman Macedonia, but Serbia had no widespread propaganda network there. Serbs were behind the Greeks and Bulgarians, especially educationally and ecclesiastically. For those reasons they needed help from someone – from the Greeks. Serbian military attaché in the Ottoman capital Jevrem Velimirovic in 1882 communicated a report to the relevant Ministry with his impressions from the trip throughout the European part of Turkey. In his report he noted that Serbs could benefit in resolving the Macedonian issue, but needed help from Greece to do so (Самарџић, 312).

Although initially not interested in political cooperation with Belgrade the Government of Trikoupis was not avoiding the economic rapprochement with Serbia. In 1882, Serbia and Greece entered into a ten-year trade agreement, thereby both sides recognising each other the position of the most favoured nation and the rights of Greeks in Serbia and Serbs in Greece (Константинова, 192).

Probably the signing of the trade agreement contributed to Belgrade considering further political cooperation with Athens. Towards the close of 1882, the Serbian diplomatic envoy arrived in Athens. His aim was to reach an agreement between the two countries over the common interests in terms of the Ottoman empire, especially over Macedonia, but the Greek government at that moment was not interested in signing any agreement with Serbia (Driault et Lheritier, 178-179). Athens was careful about the relations with Constantinople and did not want to strain the relations again; moreover it held that Serbia was not so strong in Macedonia to have to negotiate. However, as a tradition, frequent changes in the views of the Athens governments concerning ties with certain Balkan countries in this case either would not mean an end to the possibility of opening negotiations with Belgrade over Ottoman Macedonia. Thus, the Greek envoy in the Serbian capital in the autumn of 1883 spoke to Pirokanac about the possibility of joint work between Greece and Serbia in order to set up a single policy of the Balkan peo-

ples, which meant they did not want anyone from the outside to interfere and that it would be useful other Balkan countries to join them (Терзић, 254). It was the beginning of a somewhat more different policy of Athens in relation to Belgrade, but it must be noticed that it took some time for that.

During 1885, the Greek government more seriously began considering the possibility of reaching an agreement between Belgrade and Athens regarding Macedonia. The Greeks believed that it would be easier to come to an agreement with Serbia over Macedonia because of the weaker Serbian position in Macedonia. However, Serbs were not thinking so and had already started to organise rallies in Serbian cities for protection of, as it was pointed out, their brothers in Old Serbia and Macedonia. The information about these rallies were initially reported in Athens newspapers only as reports without comments (Терзић, 254), but very quickly the Greek public opinion became interested in them, and especially in the petitions that were completely printed in the newspapers in Athens. The Greek government earlier showed interest in the Serbian position regarding Macedonia. At the beginning of January 1885 the government in Athens ordered its diplomatic envoy in Belgrade to learn about Serbia's views, and thus claims towards Macedonia, and the possibility of reaching an alliance between the two countries.¹ The answer was less worrisome to Athens. Greek Ambassador in his report provides an overview of Serbia's foreign policy which he found to be under the influence of Vienna. That, and the Austrian presence in Bosnia, direct Serbia southward to Thessaloniki. Serbian views for the south did not frighten Athens too much, but made it more cautious in the follow-up talks.

In Serbia, there was consideration to seek support from Athens, when the relations with Greece and Macedonia's division into spheres of interest were concerned. In 1885, the president of the Serbian government, Milutin Garašanin, submitted a plan to Serbian king Milan on the basis of which the Serbian propaganda work in the European part of the Ottoman State was to be organised, specifically in the so-called Old Serbia and Macedonia (Самарџић, 2004, 109). When Greeks were concerned, Garašanin believed that Serbia, due to Greek influence in Constantinople, needed Greek aid. According to him, the good relations between Serbia and Greece could increase the impact of Serbs in the Ottoman capital (Самарџић, 2004, 109). According to him, an agreement between Serbia and Greece was possible, but previously it was necessary to come to a consensus on the division of the spheres of interest in Macedonia (Самарџић, 2004, 109). Almost simultaneously, Greek Minister for Foreign Affairs Kontostavlos gave instructions to the Greek envoy in Belgrade to start the talks about the delineation of a line of the sphere of interests in Macedonia (Самарџић, 2004, 109). The Greek envoy acted ac-

¹Αρχεῖον Ὑπουργείων Ἐξωτερικῶν (ΑΥΕ), Πρεσβείας Βελιγραδι / 1885 /, α. 251, εω Βελιγραδι, 3 Ιαναριου, 1885

ording to the instructions of the government. Very soon he informed about his first impressions, stressing that there was enthusiasm in all about an agreement against the Ottoman empire, but when it came to the boundary of the zones of interest things would not take place very quickly. Nevertheless, an event in September 1885 changed the things.

The crisis in the Balkans caused by the unification of Bulgaria and Eastern Rumelia in September 1885 was an event that influenced the acceleration of the Greek-Serbian cooperation against the Ottoman empire (Λυπας, 127-128). The reports of the Greek diplomatic envoy in Belgrade noted the existence of a will of the Serbian government to act together with Greece and it was preparing itself in that direction (Ναλτσα, 118-119). These reports were not baseless. Serbian Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs Milutin Garašanin visited the Greek diplomatic envoy in Belgrade, Nazos. Then he requested from the Greek diplomat to ask Deliyannis what the behaviour of Greece would be to the future serious development of the situation in the region. The Serbian politician took advantage of the meeting to express Belgrade's wish for an alliance with Athens (Lascaris, 90). The following days the Serbian Prime Minister met Nazos twice and presented him the intention of Serbia to enter Macedonia and Old Serbia even without prior agreement with the Greek side, while his country considered that the joint action of the two countries would be better heard by the major powers (Lascaris, 90). What is interesting is that these Serbian positions did not provoke Greek Prime Minister Deliyannis to answer promptly the Greek diplomatic envoy in the Serbian capital. He, as late as 2 October, informed Nazos that he had received his telegrams (Lascaris, 90). According to him, the ideas of Garašanin were a good basis for further discussions. Deliyannis, mired in its own problems, was late to promptly respond to Serbian demands. However, despite the delay of the response from Athens, the Greek envoy received instructions to leave for Nis and to meet with King Milan and Garašanin (Λυπας, 128).

The Greek public and the opposition were also positive about an agreement with Serbia. Trikoupis, the leader of the Greek opposition, during his stay in Leipzig told the Greek students there that it was necessary to cooperate with Serbia, because it was the only state whose interests coincided with the Greek and did not breach, because Serbian claims did not go beyond Old Serbia and Kosovo.² This was not true, but the need for an alliance was stronger.

In parallel with the start of the talks for an alliance, the Athens government gave instructions to its consuls in Macedonia to assess the position and strength of Serbian propaganda in the area. Based on their reports official Athens was supposed to establish its position on possible talks for joint ac-

² ДАРМ, м-438, ПО, Р-1, Ф-V, пов. 30, Атина, 25 септембра 1885

tion and division of Macedonia into spheres of interest. The Greek Consul in Bitola, Panuriyas, in his report to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs argued that only fantasy could find Serbs in the areas under his jurisdiction as a consul.³ He also gave a detailed overview of the areas that included North Macedonia and in which then Greece had no diplomatic representative. According to a report of Panuriyas, in the areas around Skopje, Tetovo, Kumanovo and Kriva Palanka there were people who used the Serbian language. However, he ended his report with the conclusion that, as he noted, in the pure Greek regions of Macedonia there was no possibility for Serbia to claim any rights.⁴ This report shows that despite the common interests between the two countries it was difficult to conclude Greek-Serbian alliance. These two countries found it very easy to agree on who was their common enemy at the moment but nearly impossible to determine the zones of interests in Macedonia. Greeks were those who doubted more the Serbian intentions about parts of Macedonia. They did not have great confidence in the Serbs, because they felt that Serbian claims not only to the North but also to the central zone of Macedonia were unfounded. Moreover, despite all the desires of friendship and cooperation it was a question whether the possible alliance could be materialised. Trikoupis, who allegedly thought that an alliance with Serbia was possible, in conversation with the Serbian envoy in London, Mijatovic, on 29 September 1885 expressed doubt about the possibility of a joint Greek-Serbian action against the Ottoman empire, primarily because of the military unpreparedness of his state without generals, senior staff officers and military experience of the Greek army (Цамбазовски, 1985, 361). Most likely this expression of the experienced Greek politician would have an impact on further Serbian steps in view of Greece and the possibility of joint action. The negotiations continued, but with a much lower intensity. Serbs, under the Austro-Hungarian pressure, forgot for a short time about the military option, and thus the need for alliance with Greece (Lascaris, 92). Such was the response of Garašanin to Nazos. When it comes to Vienna's pressure on Belgrade, we have to mention the name of the Austro-Hungarian envoy in the Serbian capital, Khevenhüller, who exerted pressure on Serbian government (Λυπας, 128).

Contacts established with Belgrade continued in late October when Stojan Novakovic visited the Greek ambassador in the Serbian capital. Novakovic stressed that he was speaking in the name of Pirokanac, one of the leaders of the opposition, in order to reach an understanding with Greece over Macedonia. In the conversation Novakovic stressed to the Greek diplomat that the Serbian public opinion was in favour of alliance with the Greeks and

³ΑΥΕ/Β, Προξενιας Μακεδονιας, φακ. 1895, Πανουργιας - Εξωτερικων Υπουργειον, εν Βιτωλιος, 2 σεπτεμβριου 1885

⁴ Ibid.

considered it to be necessary (Lascaris, 96). Nazos, the Greek representative in Belgrade, pointed out to Novakovic that he could not commit himself to a final agreement, because he had no authorisation from his government for that, but they could discuss about Macedonia (Kofos, 96). It was a good chance for the Greek envoy to learn of the current Serbian views on Macedonia. According to a report of Nazos, the Serbian interlocutor assumed more appeasing behaviour when the demarcation line was in question and Novakovic seemed inclined to accept as a basis for further discussion the proposal of the Greek side for the line Ohrid-Krushevo Strumica-Melnik-Nevrokop, where the main preoccupation of Novakovic was how to get the commitment of the Greeks for Serbian trade exit point – Thessaloniki (Kofos, 96). Novakovic, according to the Greek diplomat, stressed that this line would be acceptable for the Serbs if the Greeks pledged that the Thessaloniki port would be accessible to Serbia as well (Lascaris, 97). Nazos noted that this would be acceptable to Greece, but the Serbs should their views on territorial sea exit point focus on the Adriatic. This is less surprising because neither of the two countries had the capacity to conquer most of the Ottoman territories. Mousikos, the Greek envoy in Belgrade, in one of his reports in 1890, based on the documentation he had available, went back to the conversation of Nazos with Novakovic, even stating that the Serbian politician and diplomat recognised Thessaloniki as a Greek city, and Serbian claims at that time were in the northern part of Macedonia.⁵ However, these findings of the Greek diplomats were most likely exaggerated. Namely, Novakovic himself later wrote that "very little thought on joint action in Macedonia was given, as even then there was no agreement between the Serbian and Greek claims here, although a strong need for consent began to be felt. There was more than one enemy, Greece could not be seriously counted on, nor was it showing will and readiness to immediately act." (Новаковић, 396-397). In addition, in one of his reports in 1890 he went back to the conversation with Nazos emphasising that his main goal was to learn of the Greek claims in Macedonia and the answer was the one that had already been accepted in Athens. Nazos, according to his statements, told him that it was a strategic border and there was no possibility of concessions in this regard (Џамбазовски, 1988, 151-152). These statements by one of the participants in the conversation is the exact opposite of the Greek claims. This means that not only was there not an agreement reached over Macedonia, but both sides were aware that there were no conditions for joint action. Nazos had a conversation also with Pirokanac. In the conversation with Nazos, Pirokanac replied that he shared the views of Novakovic who was working on an ethnological study dealing with the territories that were of interest to both sides (Lascaris,

⁵ АΥΕ, α. 148, Μουσικος - Δραγουμην, εν Βελιγραδι, 19 απριλιου 1890.

97). According to the Serbian politician, the study of Novakovic in the future would serve to clear the possible disputes between the two parties.

When it came to the possibility of Greek-Serbian cooperation, foreign representatives in the Greek capital saw some jealousy for growing Austrian interest in Serbia (Documente, 669). However, some Greek politicians did not share this opinion. In an interview published in London in October 1885, the leader of the Greek opposition, Trikoupis, stated that Greece was not jealous of Serbia and Romania for their relations with Austria, but was not prepared either to follow Belgrade in this barren policy (Gounaris, 13). Greek historian Vasilis Gounaris referring to this statement of Trikoupis noticed that this did not mean that Serbs irreversibly lost the position of "brothers" (Gounaris, 13). However, the Greeks slowly became aware that in Macedonia they were getting another rival who might be "brother", but with his own claims on the ground.

On 2 November 1885, Serbia committed aggression against the Principality of Bulgaria and thus the tense situation in the Balkans reached its culmination. Ottoman authorities took measures to strengthen its forces on the border with Greece as a precaution⁶.

The war between Serbia and Bulgaria ended relatively quickly with the great surprise victory of the Bulgarian army. It could not but affect the Greeks who were surprised that a young military force managed to win, at least on paper, over a far more prepared opponent. Bulgarian military success could not leave Greek political circles indifferent, especially because of the known claims of the two countries towards Macedonia. In Athens it was believed that the victory over Serbia would strengthen the Bulgarian positions in the Balkans. Certainly that opportunity was not acceptable to Greece.

The Eastern Rumelia crisis ended with confirmation of the Bulgarian unification which was due to the military victory over Serbia. On the other hand, in the spring of 1886, as a result of the unyielding government of Deliyannis, who persistently demanded territorial compensation at the expense of the Ottoman Empire, Greece faced a naval blockade by the Great Powers. This led to the toppling of the government of Deliyannis. All this resulted in a new situation in the Balkans which had to be taken into account by the governments in Athens and Belgrade. Both had claims to Ottoman Macedonia, but now a new factor emerged in the region which saw this area as part of its future territorially larger state - Bulgaria.

The government in Belgrade, most likely, in order to step up its activities in Ottoman territory, sent the famous Serbian scholar and politician Stojan Novakovic to be Serbian diplomatic envoy in Constantinople. He proved to be a real solution for Serbian ambitions. Very quickly he managed to conclude a consul convention with the Ottoman government, which enabled

⁶ΔΑΡΜ, Μ-28, Blunt-White, Salonica, 7 November 1885, FO 78/3777.

the opening of Serbian consulates in Ottoman territory, including Macedonia. When it comes to the Greeks, it should be noted that this Serbian politician, diplomat and scholar was respected by them, because they felt that he was friendly to their country (Лупиќ, 129).

Along with sending Novakovic in Constantinople, Belgrade was considering closer contacts with the Greek government. In December 1886, Serbian colonel Topalovic arrived in the Greek capital. The very fact that he was a Serbian military officer and envoy of the Belgrade government was sufficient to raise doubts among the envoys of the great powers and the Ottoman empire. The British envoy in Serbia immediately requested information from the Serbian Foreign Minister Franasovic about the purpose of Topalovic's visit to the Greek capital. The answer could be expected. Namely, the Serbian government did not give any orders to Topalovic for political affairs, but if the Greek side raised a question he could talk about a Balkan confederation on his personal behalf.⁷ This answer, of course, did not satisfy the British diplomat, who in his report to the Foreign Office openly expressed his doubt that Greece and Serbia were trying to reach an agreement about the future partition of Macedonia.⁸ After failing to learn more from Franasovic, the British envoy tried to get information through the conversation with the Greek envoy in Belgrade, Nazos. Earlier, the Greek diplomat had had a conversation with Serbian King Milan with whom he had discussed the idea of a Balkan confederation.⁹ Nazos, unlike the Serbian Minister, said that it was possible for Topalovic to raise political issues. In a very diplomatic language, he pointed to his British colleague that he did not know what his government wanted, but was very sorry that there was no one to point to the Sultan that the understanding with Greece would be achieved through diplomatic concessions to it. Meanwhile, the British Ambassador to the Greek capital was also interested in the visit of Topalovic. Trikoupis, in conversation with him, told him that he and the guest from Serbia had exchanged views on the possibility of reaching an agreement on an alliance among the Balkan states. According to Trikoupis, his views differed from those of Topalovic. He thought that an alliance was possible even without an agreement for distribution of the territories of the Ottoman empire.

Greeks still had no clear idea of which areas of the Ottoman state the term Old Serbia referred to. Therefore, their diplomats in Belgrade and in the Ottoman Empire often communicated reports concerning the Serbian propaganda, but also how far they considered the term Old Serbia extended. Thus, the Greek Consul in Bitola in one of his reports speaking about the activities undertaken by representatives of the Serbian propaganda, especially

⁷ ДАРМ, М-160, Wyndham-Earl of Iddesleigh, Belgrade, 4 December 1886, FO 287/6

⁸ Ibid

⁹ ДАРМ, М-160, Wyndham-Earl of Iddesleigh, Belgrade, 4 December 1886, FO 105/58

the association of Saint Sava, gave the opinion that not much attention should be paid, nor importance be given to the activities of this Serbian Association on the territory which fell under the jurisdiction of the consulate in Bitola, that is, that there the term Old Serbia could not be used, and the Greek envoy in Belgrade also signalled that that term implied the Macedonian territory to Veles and Shtip.¹⁰ This meant that Serbian claims did not concern the line of the Greek claims in Macedonia, but the future developments would deny it.

Serbian King Milan viewed the victory of Trikoupis in the elections in Greece as an opportunity for talks with Athens on the harmonisation of the claims of both countries to Ottoman Macedonia. Serbian monarch openly said that to the Greek envoy in Belgrade Nazos (Λυπας, 129). He, in turn, said that such talks should be initially raised at a semi-official academic level.¹¹ According to his thinking, this initiative should be raised by Sylogos for the spread of Greek education from Athens and the Association of St. Sava from Belgrade. Therefore, it was not surprising at all that soon the idea would be implemented. The President of the Association of St. Sava, Nikola-jevic, also had a meeting with the Greek envoy in Belgrade in which he offered Athens an agreement on the joint border in the areas of interest in Macedonia (Kofos, 99). The Greek government very carefully considered this proposal of Nikolajevic behind which was actually official Belgrade, but did not respond to it. There was a reason for that. Namely, the Serbian request also included Ohrid, Bitola and Florina, which caused surprise and indignation among the Greeks (Λυπας, 130).

Thus, there is no surprise for the fact that Greeks increasingly began to follow what was happening in Serbia and connected with Macedonia. The celebration of the 500-year anniversary since the Battle of Kosovo, which was made with great fanfare in Serbia did not remain unnoticed in the Greek press. And it was precisely about the question of Macedonia. Thus, Athenian *Acropolis* noted that Macedonia had already assumed a position in the Serbian historical symbolism (Gounaris, 18).

After the opening of the consulates in Thessaloniki and Skopje, in 1889 Serbs opened their consulate in Bitola. The Serbian consulate in Bitola was opened on 12 (25) April 1889 on the Day of Marko (the day of King Marko) (Терзић, 2008, 331). The symbolism was striking. The connection of modern times with the medieval past only showed the aim of the Serbs. This act of the Serbian government did not have favourable reception in Athens. Although Greeks officially did not object, their behaviour in the negotiations, which were conducted during the nineties of the XIX century for division of

¹⁰ ΑΓΕ/Β, Πρεσβια, 1887/Κωνσταντινοπολις, Πανουργιας-Μαυροκορδατου, Βιτωλιος, 31 μαρτιου 1887

¹¹ Ibid.

Macedonia into spheres of interest, showed that the Serbian consulate in Bitola was a thorn on their side. Given that the Greeks regarded Bitola to be an indisputable part of its sphere of interest in Ottoman Macedonia, their behaviour was not surprising at all.

It must be noted that the opening of the Serbian consulates in Macedonia was not in Greek interest. Thus, the opening of the Serbian consulates in Skopje, Bitola and Thessaloniki resulted in interesting and not much enjoyable articles in the Greek newspapers (Γουνάρης, 405). However, the doors to some agreement with the Serbs, at least among Greek journalists, were not fully closed. It can be seen in an article in the influential Athenian daily *Acropolis*. In a column dedicated to Macedonia and the possibility of a compromise with the other aspirants to this Ottoman province, the author remarked "The Greeks became very sober and willing for making a deal for Macedonia. If they can reach an agreement with the Bulgarians, the fiercest enemy, then they can certainly do the same with the Serbs. Only with unity and cooperation, could the Balkan countries avoid the fate to be puppets of the major powers." (Gounaris, 15).

It can be concluded that in the eighties of the 19th century Athens and Belgrade commenced some negotiations for closer cooperation regarding Ottoman Macedonia. These negotiations were somehow follow-up of the 1867 agreement on an alliance between the two countries which never became operational. Although the talks in this period were not much intensive, in some way they were an introduction to what happened in the relations between the two countries in the last decade of the 19th century, at least when it comes to Macedonia. Both countries, especially Greece, already got clearer views as to the boundary of the claims towards Ottoman Macedonia. Although, seemingly, both Belgrade and Athens believed it possible to negotiate for Macedonia and come to some agreement, the future did not confirm that, and the only answer lies in the fact that both sides considered this area to be part of their own historical heritage in the way they saw and interpreted it.

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