Athens-Skopje:
An Uneasy Symbiosis
(1995-2002)

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Edited by Evangelos Kofos and Vlasis Vlasidis

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RESEARCH CENTRE FOR MACEDONIAN HISTORY AND DOCUMENTATION

MUSEUM OF THE MACEDONIAN STRUGGLE FOUNDATION

Athens-Skopje: An Uneasy Symbiosis (1995-2002)

Evangelos Kofos - Vlasis Vlasidis
Editors

HELLENIC FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN AND FOREIGN POLICY
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FOREWORD

The 13th October 2002 marked the expiry of the Interim Accord between Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM). This Accord had regularised relations between the two neighbour states for the seven years of its planned duration. Given that both countries were apparently satisfied with the Accord's framework and the progress of its implementation, neither party declared any intention of allowing it to lapse. It will, therefore, remain in force until it is replaced by a new, 'final' agreement, or until one of the two sides declares it void.

Academic reflection, discussion, and analysis of the workings of the Interim Accord, began in early 2002 during talks among scholars and researchers at the Research Centre for Macedonian History and Documentation (KEMIT) of the Museum of the Macedonian Struggle Foundation (IMMA) in Thessaloniki. There was general agreement that the one issue which had loomed large in the mind of the Greek public in the early 1990s, had now moved out of the harsh light of public debate and had found itself mantled in a veil of deliberate silence. This has occurred despite the fact that dramatic progress has been made in the development of economic and political relations between the two states. Meanwhile, the 'national question', as the dispute over the name 'Macedonia' was known, has remained in a state of potentially "destabilising stability". It was unthinkable that the Greek academic community, which has produced dozens of papers and

articles on Balkan issues over the last few years, should fail to examine and evaluate the wide range of bilateral relations between Greece and FYROM over the period in which the Interim Accord has been in force. KEMIT has taken the initiative of filling this gap.

Responsibility for this project was undertaken by seven scholars from various disciplines, who work in or are associated with universities and research centres in Thessaloniki, Florina, Athens and Piraeus. With one exception, the volume's contributors are Greeks of Greek Macedonian origin. Hence, they are not only academic specialists in their respective fields, but also have actual experience in related areas. Their field research in Greece has been enriched by journeys to FYROM to interview officials, academics and journalists, and the use of the internet, which has also proved invaluable in many ways. In March 2003 there was a first public presentation of their findings at a conference organised by KEMIT at the University of Athens, with the collaboration of the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP).

Overseeing the preparation of the volume was by no means a simple task. It was necessary for it to accommodate contributions by writers from different fields of specialisation and, as far as possible, ensure that overlapping was avoided. Our intention as editors was that the individual texts should retain their autonomy while at the same time functioning as pieces in a mosaic, thereby providing a kaleidoscopic picture of the bilateral relations in all their different facets.

As editors we were not interested in tailoring the contributions in order to produce an artificial unanimity. We preferred to leave it to the contributors to present their research findings and the analyses of their respective fields of study, and offer what assessments and observations they saw fit on the future development of relations between the two countries. Obviously,

each author bears sole responsibility for his or her own judgements and proposals as these do not necessarily reflect the views of their fellow contributors or the institutions which have supported the project.

In preparing this volume we have enjoyed the whole-hearted moral and material support of the Board of Administrators of the Museum of the Macedonian Struggle Foundation (IMMA). We would like to express our particular thanks to ELIAMEP for helping to organise the Athens conference, to the respective diplomatic services in Athens and Skopje for making available valuable information and data, to the Macedonian Press Agency in Thessaloniki, and to the Greek Press Office in Skopje for similar assistance. Thanks are also extended to officers of the Political Affairs Department at the Ministry of Macedonia and Thrace in Thessaloniki, to representatives of the political, academic and media communities in FYROM, and NGOs, who kindly agreed to be interviewed. For the English edition we would like to thank ELIAMEP for including this book in their series of publications, Lexicon Translation Services S.A. Thessaloniki, as well as Ms. Deborah Whitehouse and Dr. Maria Gropas, translators.

The editors
Evangelos Kofos
Vlasis Vlasidis

INTRODUCTION

Popular wisdom urges us to ensure we are on good terms with our neighbours. As a tenet of strategy this popular wisdom had guided the course of Greek-Yugoslav relations for the forty years following the end of the Greek Civil War. Therefore, it was with considerable surprise, in the early 1990's, that Greece realized that this functional coexistence with the Federal Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia (FSRY) was beginning to disappear. At the end of 1991, the FSRY's position as Greece's neighbour was taken over - in a bloodless transfer of power - by a new state which assumed the title of the 'Republic of Macedonia'. This was none other than the former Socialist Republic of Macedonia (SRM), elevated to the status of an independent state. Henceforth, the establishment of appropriate relations with this new neighbour became a major challenge for Greek diplomacy.

Prior to 1991, non-aligned Yugoslavia had proved a key factor in ensuring Greece's security to the north. Greece had reciprocated by ensuring Western communication and support so necessary for Yugoslavia in times of international tension. The only real source of friction between the two neighbours was the Macedonian problem. This was a relic of the dramatic decade 1940-1950, which in the years following the war, emerged as a

combination of minority and irredentist claims, challenging, at the same time, the historical and cultural identity of Greek Macedonia and its Greek Macedonians.

Those reactions, which centred on the SRM, however, were played down as far as possible by the governments of the two states who continued to maintain their bilateral relations on an amicable level. Nonetheless, in the last few years before the collapse of the Yugoslav Federation, nationalist elements in the SRM had succeeded in promoting their views through the Yugoslav federal bodies. These triggered a new round of tension between Greece and Yugoslavia on the Macedonian issue, even at the international level. It was at this stage that the federal Yugoslav government in Belgrade was replaced in Skopje by the government of the independent 'Republic of Macedonia'. It was inevitable that the climate of confrontation would now shift to relations between Athens and Skopje. The difference was that the confrontation would develop without the calming influence of the traditionally shared interests of Athens and Belgrade.

Moreover, there were new factors which would hinder the development of good relations between Greece and her new neighbour. The repercussions of the collapse of the divided and polarised Europe and the disintegration of the Yugoslav Federation in the Balkans created conditions of instability in the broader region which led to nervousness in Athens. Furthermore, the dynamic appearance of an emotionally charged cultural difference, expressed by Greek public opinion in its categorical refusal to countenance its new neighbour under the state name of 'Macedonia' fostered and sustained for four whole years (1992–1995) a climate of acute tension in the relations between the two neighbours. In the end, external factors, mainly the wars in the northern tier of former Yugoslavia, precipitated intervention by the international community to resolve the problem.

On 13th September 1995, an 'Interim Accord between Greece and FYROM' was signed in New York following mediation by the USA and the UN. This accord regularised bilateral relations and lay down the foundations for progress on all fronts. This development was possible because both sides agreed to postpone for future settlement their dispute over the name of the neighbouring country which had already been accepted by the UN under the provisional, international name of 'Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia' (FYROM).

In 2002, the completion of the initial duration of the Interim Accord marked an important milestone of seven years of 'symbiosis' between Athens and Skopje. Given that neither party expressed its intention of letting the Interim Accord expire, means that it will essentially remain in force indefinitely, unless either side decides to withdraw. This is, therefore, a suitable moment for a sober assessment not only of the working of the Accord but also of its role in the development of bilateral state relations, the cultivation of constructive contacts and cooperation between the citizens of the two countries, and the prospect of their further development in the broader context of Southeastern Europe and in a future united Europe. It is, also, an appropriate occasion to review how efficient the Accord has been in creating the necessary framework for resolving sensitive issues which were merely touched upon in the text of the agreement. Among these is the problem of the final name of Greece's neighbour state, as well as the related problems of conflicting cultural and historical identities. Looking at the future rather than the past, it is essential to alleviate these tensions by finding an honourable solution to questions which tarnish the image of both neighbours and inhibit the development of meaningful progress both in interstate relations and in the private sector.

The subject discussed in this volume assumes a broader

interdisciplinary and political interest. The Interim Accord did not follow the classic format of an international document designed to resolve bilateral disagreements in the areas of security, issues of irredentism and minorities, or to establish of a statutory framework for political, economic and commercial relations. It had to tackle, moreover, a series of particularly complicated cultural differences (national symbols, state name, historical and cultural identities) and find ways of approaching or even bypassing those problems not ready for resolution at the time of signing the Accord.

Nikos Zaikos' painstaking legal analysis of the Interim Accord uncovers the attempts made by both sides to circumvent entrenched opinions and lay new and effective foundations, enshrined in law, for their future relations. To attain this objective, the authors of the Accord indulged in remarkable legal and diplomatic "acrobatics", anxious that the unresolved issues should not stand in the way of the process of regularising bilateral state relations. It is significant that in the text, there is no reference to the names of the two countries. The same tactic of not addressing the issue of the disputed name was followed in all subsequent official agreements concluded over the seven-year period. According to Zaikos, the Greek government's tactic of not presenting the Interim Accord and subsequent agreements before the Greek Parliament for ratification, raises questions of their validity in domestic law. Their validity, however, as international agreements remains intact.

Having said this, the authors' examination of the individual aspects of the bilateral relations presents a picture resembling the 'double face of Janus'. The chapters by Haralambos Kontonis, Christos Nikas and Despina Syrri, who analyse political relations, economic and commercial cooperation, as well as the role of civil society organisations , respectively, illustrate what is clearly a

positive picture of progress. Despite having to struggle against an unfavourable psychological climate in a highly unstable environment, all three sectors demonstrate impressive progress. Moreover, this occurred at a time when various international analysts envisaged the involvement of FYROM in the Yugoslav wars of succession raging across the former Yugoslav Federation. This positive development is not only due to the indices of the commercial transactions on each side, and the volume of Greek investment which has rendered Greece a 'strategic investor' and 'privileged partner' of FYROM indices depicted so fully in the text and tables contributed by Christos Nikas. Of equal importance are the political interventions by Athens on behalf of Skopje to and within the European and Atlantic alliances of which Greece is a member, and its multilevel, no-strings-attached support which Greece supplied to the troubled political leadership of FYROM at the time of the armed ethnic confrontation with the ethnic Albanians in 2000-2001. These are described by Haralambos Kondonis in his contribution. On the other hand, as we learn from the contribution by Despina Syrri, cooperation between the civil societies has not grown at the same pace. The absence of institutional infrastructures and lack of tradition in this sphere have been the main hindrance to progress in this area. Nevertheless, recent messages and prospects appear positive, especially given the development of a number of concrete initiatives particularly in the sensitive cross-border sector.

However, there is also the reverse side of the mask of Janus. Namely, the difficulties bequeathed to the bilateral state relations and communities of the two countries by the unresolved difference over the name and the consequent tension over issues of historical and cultural identity. Evangelos Kofos offers a critical approach to the Greek perspective on the problem, on two levels: on the 'official' (state) level, where ten years (1993-2002) of

efforts and negotiations failed to find a solution, and on the level of 'public perception' of the problem over the same period. Kofos bases his examination of 'public perception' on the recorded reaction and pressure tactics of various groups, including political elites, the media, public opinion (as revealed by opinion polls), the academic community, the Church, Greek communities abroad, the 'ethnic Slav Macedonians' and 'Northern Greek Macedonians'. The essay ends with a sub-section in which some concluding thoughts are offered, assessing the situation and the prospects for the unresolved problems of name and identity. The same questions –this time approached from FYROM's perspective– are presented and analysed by two other contributors. Aristotelis Tziampiris concentrates on the way the state agencies of Greece's neighbouring country have approached negotiation on the issue of the name. Through a study of official texts and interviews, the author identifies those factors which influenced and shaped FYROM policy on the issue. Tziampiris also pays particular attention to the role of the international community, both on the official level and in the semi-official agencies, NGOs and think-tanks to the extent that they were involved in the quest for a solution. For his part, Vlasis Vlasidis follows the course of the negotiations and the reactions of public opinion to the problem of the name and bilateral relations throughout the whole seven-year period. He achieves this through a detailed account and analysis of reporting in the FYROM media. He also traces the formation of the historical and cultural identity of the younger generation in FYROM, guided by recent editions of school history textbooks. Essentially he engages in identifying the 'image of the neighbour' and the 'Macedonian identity' acquired by today's schoolchildren, and the consequences these will have on the future coexistence of the coming of age younger generations on each side of the Greece-FYROM border.

In conclusion, the insistence of FYROM's leadership on not advancing beyond the 'constitutional name' of their country, coupled by Greece's refusal to accept what is, in essence, the monopolisation of the name 'Macedonia' by its neighbour, render a jointly acceptable solution far from easy. Indeed, all contributors appear concerned by the state of limbo in which the issue of the name finds itself suspended. The editors believe that the reader is free to accept or reject the position or point of view of any contributor, in line with his/her own perspective on the issue. Indifference to the issue, however, should not be an option.

Evangelos Kofos