

# Foreign intervention and conflict in the Balkans

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I had previously commented ("FYROM's Slavomacedonism" [Part I](#), [Part II](#), and [Part III](#)) on the Greece-FYROM conflict, concerning the objections of the former to the constitutional name chosen by the latter ("Republic of Macedonia"). My personal conclusion was that ever since Balkan peoples acquired a distinct national self-identification, during and after the fall of the Ottoman empire, foreign powers used these identifications for their proper interest. Always faithful to the *divide et impera* doctrine, imperial powers cultivated conflict among Balkan peoples and kept them successfully subservient.

Even when this was not done on purpose, conflict was a direct outgrowth of their own ignorance. Balkan history and reality are very complex. Indeed, an outsider would have a hard time describing and analyzing the regional tensions and dynamics having developed through the course of millennia. It would take a Historian specialized in Balkan history to do so in depth and with accuracy. In the absence of any such training, a useful aid would be the personal experience of living in a Balkan country; of being part of its culture and of interacting with people who actually lived aspects of Balkan history. Unfortunately, international policy makers have neither the aforementioned academic credentials, nor the first hand experience of living in the region and sharing its culture. In addition, the interests they serve rarely coincide with those of the Balkan peoples. Historically, foreign intervention has been carried out without knowledge of the Balkan realities, nor interest in peace in the region.

## Examples of foreign intervention

To limit the examples of foreign intervention in the last one century and a half, it was Russia that instigated Panslavism in the Balkans to break the region away from the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires in order to gain access to the warm waters of the Mediterranean. It was also Russia that obliged the Ottoman Empire to recognize the independence of Bulgaria (Saint Stefan treaty, 1878) and then again it was the Great Powers that reversed that treaty with the Treaty of London.

It was by Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm II's blank check that Austria's Francis Joseph I, declared war on Serbia in 1914, unleashing the First World War. And it was this war between Kaiser Wilhelm and his cousin King George V of the United Kingdom (who then changed his house's name from *Saxe-Coburg & Gotha* to *Windsor*) that brought the Balkan countries at each other's throat for yet another time, two short years after the Second Balkan War.

It was under pressures from Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany that the Province of Croatia (*Banovina Hrvatska*) was created inside the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, in 1939 (Cvetković-Maček Agreement). It was the Croatian organization of Ustashe that would later collaborate with the Nazi during the Second World War, when Croatia was annexed to Germany. It was under the Nazi rule, that the

Ustashe regime would set up the Jasenovac concentration camp, in the standards of camps in Germany and Poland. There, hundreds of thousands were murdered between 1941-45, mainly Serbs.

It was under the Vatican's blessings that the Ustashe regime undertook a major campaign of converting Orthodox Serbs to Catholicism. And it was the Vatican that provided safe haven to the Ustashe leaders after the defeat of the axis. It was through the Vatican Bank and Swiss banks that the money and gold which were stolen from the Serb and Jewish victims were laundered. And, as was revealed by US documents in 1986, it was the Vatican that helped Pavelic and other Ustashe senior officials to gain safe passage to Argentina.

After the war, it was Stalin that cultivated the idea of an independent united Macedonia and of Macedonism. It was hoped that a Socialist, united "Macedonia" would provide the Soviet Union, with the long-sought port to warm waters of the Mediterranean. In his words: "*Cultural autonomy must be granted to Pirin Macedonia [Blagoevgrad region] within the framework of Bulgaria [...] That a Macedonian consciousness has not yet developed among the population is of no account. No such consciousness existed in Belarus either when we proclaimed it a Soviet Republic. However, later it was shown that Belarusian people did in fact exist.*" [\[1\]](#)

Although Stalin initially favored the idea of a Federation between Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, with a "Republic of Macedonia" as one of the federated states, he then opposed it seeing that it could escalate to a much wider federation. Dimitrov's grandiose allusions (in a press conference on January 31, 1948) of a federation, or confederation, between Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Albania, Romania, Czechoslovakia, Poland Hungary and even Greece, alarmed Stalin who then decided that this agreement no longer served his plans. Tito's refusal to Stalin's demands led to Yugoslavia's expulsion from the Cominform and the Tito-Stalin split. And it was under Stalin's pressures that Bulgaro-Yugoslav relations took a serious downturn.

Between 1944 and 1964, the relations between Greece, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria reminded a rollercoaster, whose ups and downs depended on the Soviet-Yugoslav relations. In particular, the case of the *Communist Party of Bulgaria* (CPB) could be viewed as amusing, if it wasn't in reality so depressing for Balkan affairs. Kofos counts no less than five entirely contradictory shifts of the CPB's policies, depending on Moscow directives. From openly "pro-Macedonian" stance between 1944-48 (Gotse Delchev's relics were removed from Sofia and presented to the fledgling "People's Republic of Macedonia" in an official ceremony), and the recognition of a "Macedonian" ethnicity, they became actively pro-Bulgarian and anti-Macedonian (between 1948-54) after the Tito-Cominform split. At that time "Macedonians" were re-Bulgarised. Then, in 1955 "Macedonians" were "re-recognized" as an ethnicity after Stalin's death, during the ensuing rapprochement between Yugoslavia and the USSR (under Khrushchev). In 1958, amidst Soviet criticisms of "Yugoslav revisionism", Bulgaria passed to the offensive by "de-recognizing" the "Macedonian" ethnicity and "re-Bulgarising" its citizens of the region, only to "de-Bulgarise" them again after 1962 when things changed again. All that time, Greek-Yugoslav relationships improved or deteriorated, depending on Belgrade's need of Athens as a contact to the West and as a non-aggressive neighbor.[\[2\]](#)

### **Foreign intervention in Yugoslav wars and in the dissolution of Yugoslavia**

As these developments are more recent, they are more pertinent to the current balance of powers. So we will analyze them to greater depth.

More recently, it was Germany that first recognized Croatia and Slovenia as independent states. On 11 December 1991, the then German foreign minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher announced Germany's recognition of the two breakaway republics without any consultation with Germany's EU partners. About five decades had passed since Nazi Germany and fascist Italy achieved the artificial creation of the *Banovina Hrvatska* (Croatia), which became their ally during the war and existed as an "independent" entity only for a short time. It was the reunited Germany that succeeded where Nazi Germany had previously failed, i.e. in achieving Croatia's recognition as a sovereign state. Now, once more, Germany had access to the waters of the Adriatic through its client.

However, it was also a US goal to dismember Yugoslavia. On November 5, 1990, a year before the civil wars in Yugoslavia had started, the US Congress passed the 1991 Foreign Operations

Appropriation Law 101-513. This bill, without a previous warning, cut all aid, trade, credits and loans to Yugoslavia and then pushed the World Bank and International Monetary Fund to do the same. The bill derecognized the country of Yugoslavia and announced that the US will deal with the constituent republics instead.

The US policy of pursuing the dismemberment of Yugoslavia was verified by the last US ambassador in a united Yugoslavia, Warren Zimmermann. Some weeks after Germany's recognition of Croatia (January 21, 1992), in an interview in the Croatian newspaper DANAS he said: "*I have to admit that at this moment the recognition of Croatia is not on our agenda. But this does not mean that this temporary American approach will be around forever [...] We very decisively told the Serbian and Army leadership that they have to honor the obligations they accepted and completely leave Croatia.*" However, his view on secession and independence was reversed when the question came to Bosnia. There, he opposed its partition to three Cantons for Muslims, Bosnians Serbs and Croats. He insisted that Bosnia should remain united under a single government: "*Equally important is the territorial integrity of Bosnia-Herzegovina, which is most threatened at this moment by the Bosnian Serb leadership, which is attempting to tear away a piece of it. We consider that extremely dangerous, and we said so to the Army and the Serbian leadership.*"

And when, contrary to all expectations, in March 1992, the leaders the three Bosnian leaders (Muslims, Serbs, Croats) decided the peaceful division of Bosnia to three ethnic regions, it was the US that pressed the Bosnian Muslims, through Warren Zimmermann, to renege on the agreement. [3], [4] On April 6, 1992, the European Union recognized Bosnia, to be followed a day later by the United States.

It was the private company *Military Professional Resources Inc* (MPRI) that, under US consent, reorganized the Croatian armed forces to mount *Operation Storm* in August of 1995. It was by that operation that 300,000 Serbs were expelled from Croatia, of which only a third has been restituted.

Then again, in 1999, it was NATO and European troops that devastated Yugoslavia under the pretext of protecting the Kosovar Albanians from Serbian genocide. Even if this accusation had been true (though volumes have been written on its fabrication), it may have mattered little to the Albanian refugees that died from NATO bombings or from radiation poisoning from the depleted Uranium munitions. The 1999 bombings of Yugoslavia during *Operation Allied Force*, saw for the first time after 58 years, Luftwaffe fighter planes flying over Yugoslavia. It was on April 6, 1941 when Luftwaffe bombed Belgrade during *Operation Punishment*.

And it was during the NATO bombings that the US-funded and trained KLA led to the expulsion of 200-250 thousand Serbs from Kosovo.

Finally, it was the US and the UN through its envoy Marti Ahtisaari that led to the unilateral secession of Kosovo from Serbia, another Pandora's box for future similar secessions throughout the globe (Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's being the first).

### **Greece-FYROM conflict**

This is the other painful issue in current Balkan relations. As soon as Yugoslavia's "Socialist Republic of Macedonia" seceded, it demanded recognition as "Republic of Macedonia".

Various foreign powers took advantage of this conflict to reap benefits. Turkey, under the neo-Ottoman imperial vision of Ozal, was the second country (after Bulgaria) that rushed to recognize FYROM under its constitutional name (February 5, 1992). And it is Turkey still, that insists to add a footnote on any NATO document that makes reference to FYROM: "*Turkey recognises the Republic of Macedonia with its constitutional name*". For Turkey's neo-Ottoman return to the Balkans, internal quarrels between Balkan countries greatly facilitate the *divide and conquer* strategy. And any occasion to seed discord between Greece and FYROM cannot be passed by.

Interventionism in the Balkans has been opportunistic, depending on the balance of power at any given moment. When Tito renamed "Vardarska" to "Macedonia", and before his split with Stalin made him a US favorite, the US State Department responded promptly through Roosevelt's Secretary of State, Edward R. Stetinius, Jr: "*This government considers that any mention to*

*"Macedonian Nation", "Macedonian Fatherland" or "Macedonian Identity" is unjustified and demagogic; it does not represent national or political reality, perceiving it, in its present resurgence, as a probable cover for offensive actions against Greece. The official policy of this government is to take the necessary steps against those who will aid Yugoslavia or Bulgaria to raise the "Macedonian Question" at the expense of Greece".<sup>[5]</sup>*

Some decades later, this line was reversed. After the Greek veto during the Bucharest NATO summit, Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Fried declared: "...Macedonian language exists. Macedonian people exist. We teach Macedonian at the Foreign Service Institute... There is also the historic Macedonian province, which is different from the country. And it's important. It's quite clear that the government in Skopje, what we Americans call the Government of Macedonia, has no claims [against Greece]. We recognize the difference between the historic territory of Macedonia, which is, of course, much larger than the current country." This ease of the US in changing positions, should greatly alarm their current "allies", as their alliance may cease at any moment.

Today, the United States are the prime player in the Balkans, with the EU lagging behind at a distance. One possibility is for the current strategy of the US to remain relatively stable; i.e. to use the Balkans for the encirclement of Russia and for the proliferation of their geopolitical domination on Europe and the Middle East. This domination has different aspects, e.g. that of energy (oil and gas pipelines) and that of military capabilities (bases in Kosovo, FYROM and Greece), which in combination allow the US to exert great influence over the region. However, we shouldn't be surprised if we saw changes in tactics by Obama's administration. The unequivocal support of the US toward FYROM has not been an issue of principle or strategy, but an issue of tactics to achieve an ultimate goal; that of absolute domination over the region and Russian encirclement. However, there is an alternative scenario currently surfacing, with a new "Yalta agreement" between the USA and Russia and the delimitation of new spheres of influence.

### **Ethnic composition of the Balkans as root of conflict**

Future developments in the Balkans are difficult to predict, however, it is safe to say that these will be negative if the Balkan peoples continue to assume their usual historic roles, i.e. those of quarrelling neighbors.

The first reason for this prediction is that these quarrels never took place in an isolated context. In such a context, conflict might not be forced upon the conflicting sides by external influences and might be less probable. Also, such a context might allow winners and losers time to lick their wounds, negotiate peace, seek reconciliation and build trust. The Americans had the great "luxury" of fighting a civil war with practically no foreign intervention. Insulated by two oceans and bordering a crippled Mexico and an unthreatening Canada they could focus on their internal strife without unwanted interferences. No country (most importantly, France or England) recognized the *Confederate States of America*, a recognition which could have fueled further bloodshed. Thus, they had the opportunity to fight a war, settle their post-war *modus vivendi* and reconstruct their country under their own terms. Balkan peoples can only dream of such luxuries. It is interesting to note that the Union government had threatened with war any country that would recognize the seceding Confederates. A century later, the US are the champions in recognitions of seceding Balkan states (Croatia being the first and Kosovo being the latest, if not the last).

The second reason is the ethnic map of the Balkans which creates a flammable mix. A multitude of intermixed populations was inherited by the Byzantine and Ottoman empires, with different ethnicities in close coexistence. This was particularly amplified in ex-Yugoslavia by the policy of artificial intermixing of populations for the creation of a common national identity. This mix and the tensions it created, can be, and have been, exploited to seed conflict for various reasons. The current layout of borders in the Balkans creates ethnic or religious minorities in virtually all Balkan countries. In particular, minorities are formed by Greeks in Southern Albania (called by Greeks "Northern Epirus"), Albanians in FYROM (in Tetovo and Gostivar), Türks in Bulgaria (Ludogorie/Deliorman and Eastern Rhodopes), Bulgarians in Moldova (in Bessarabia), Hungarians in Romania (in Transylvania), Croats in Slovenia, Serbs in Northern Kosovo, Serbs in Croatia, Croats in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbs in Slovenia and Serbs in Bosnia-Herzegovina (in the Republica Srpska). We might also mention the Roma, with minorities in all these countries, as well as other ethnic groups with no official nation-state representation. We should also mention waves of refugees

created by the Yugoslav wars, which have still to be repatriated. In particular Serbs populations, the great losers of these wars, fled Kosovo and Croatia in the hundreds of thousands and their situation still hasn't been rectified.

The reality we just described constitutes fertile soil for irredentism, expansionism and separatism to grow, particularly if these are deliberately sown by foreign intervention. It is certain that animosity has always existed within the Balkans, particularly after the nascent nationalist movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, foreign intervention has always been the oil that kept the fire burning. The one and only occurrence of a brief alliance between Serbia, Greece, Bulgaria and Montenegro, incurred the virtual eviction of the Ottoman Empire from Europe (first Balkan War, 1912). One can only imagine what a sustained alliance could achieve.

As Sir Steven Runciman put it: "*Had the Orthodox states of Eastern Europe been able to bring themselves together in a real alliance, they might have been able to hold out against the West and the Turks alike. But civil wars and the latent dislike of the Balkan Slavs for the Greeks prevented any such alliance.*" [6] While he was referring to the last years of the Byzantine Empire, his conclusions hold even today.

Slavs (whatever their national identification), Greeks, Albanians and many other nationalities, are neighbors in the Balkans and this is a given. It is a reality. My grandmother used to say: "*Respect your God and your neighbor*", meaning that it is as imperative to have good relations with your God, as it is to do so with your neighbor. Although God is a matter of faith, neighbors in our case, are a *matter of fact*.

## References

[1] Stalin to Bulgarian delegation (G. Dimitrov, V. Kolarov, T. Kostov); the Kremlin, June 7, 1946 :"*Cultural autonomy must be granted to Pirin Macedonia within the framework of Bulgaria. Tito has shown himself more flexible than you - possibly because he lives in a multiethnic state and has had to give equal rights to the various peoples. Autonomy will be the first step towards the unification of Macedonia, but in view of the present situation there should be no hurry on this matter. Otherwise, in the eyes of the Macedonian people the whole mission of achieving Macedonian autonomy will remain with Tito and you will get the criticism. You seem to be afraid of Kimon Georgiev, you have involved yourselves too much with him and do not want to give autonomy to Pirin Macedonia. That a Macedonian consciousness has not yet developed among the population is of no account. No such consciousness existed in Belarus either when we proclaimed it a Soviet Republic. However, later it was shown that Belarusian people did in fact exist.*"

[2] E. Kofos, "*Nationalism and Communism in Macedonia*", Institute for Balkan Studies, Thessaloniki 1964, pp. 223-224.

[3] David Binder wrote in "*U.S. policymakers on Bosnia admit errors in opposing partition in 1992*", (*New York Times*, August 29, 1993):

*On February 23, 1992, in Lisbon, the three Bosnian leaders - Mr. Izetbegovic [for the Bosnian Muslims], Radovan Karadzic for the Bosnian Serbs and Mate Boban for the Bosnian Croats - endorsed a proposal that the republic be a confederation divided into three ethnic regions. Mr. Izetbegovic's acceptance of partition, which would have denied him and his Muslim party a dominant role(!) in the republic, shocked... United States policy makers [...] The embassy was for recognition of Bosnia and Herzegovina from sometime in February on, "Immediately after Mr. Izetbegovic returned from Lisbon, Mr. Zimmermann called on him in Sarajevo... "He said he didn't like it," I told him, if he didn't like it, why sign it?" Dr Karadzic ... "Bosnia and Herzegovina should not be recognized as a unitarian, independent entity." Serbs, he said, "want our own state."*

*On March 16, Dr. Karadzic warned of "a civil war between ethnic groups and religions with hundreds of thousands dead and hundreds of towns destroyed." He added so accurately, "After such a war we would have completely the same situation: three Bosnia-Herzegovinas, which we HAVE RIGHT NOW."*

*That day, the three Bosnian leaders met again in Sarajevo for another round of talks. Late the following night, they signed a new agreement to divide Bosnia into "three constituent units" based on ethnic criteria.*

*Dr. Karadzic was momentarily euphoric, calling it "a great day for Bosnia and Herzegovina." But within days Mr. Izetbegovic voiced strong reservations, saying the only reason he had signed was because the Europeans told him that he had to if he wanted to gain international recognition of his government.*

[4] Jose Cutileiro, Secretary-General of the Western European Union, wrote in the "Letters" part of The Economist (9-15 December, 1995) a letter titled: "*Pre-war Bosnia*", in which he stated:

*Sir - In your article on Bosnia (November 25th), you say that in February 1992, before the war had started, Lord Carrington and I "drafted a constitution that would have turned the country into a confederation of Swiss-style cantons. The Muslims refused to accept what they considered to be the disintegration of Bosnia." NOT QUITE.*

*After several rounds of talks our "principles for future constitutional arrangements for Bosnia and Herzegovina" were **AGREED BY ALL THREE PARTIES** (Muslim, Serb and Croat) in Sarajevo on March 18th 1992) as the basis for future negotiations. These continued, **MAPS AND ALL**, until the summer, when the **MUSLIMS RENEGED ON THE AGREEMENT**. Had they not done so, the Bosnian question might have been settled earlier, with less loss of (mainly Muslim) life and land. To be fair, President Izetbegovic and his aides were **ENCOURAGED TO SCUPPER THAT DEAL** and to fight for a unitary Bosnian state by well-meaning outsiders who thought they knew better.*

[5] Circular No 868014/26-12-44.

[6] Sir Steven Runciman, "The Great Church in Captivity", Cambridge University Press, 1968, p. 84.

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