

# National Identity *versus* Minority Language. The Greek and Bulgarian Experience in the 20th century

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*Το άρθρο εστιάζει στη μεταχείριση των μειονοτικών πληθυσμών στην Ελλάδα και τη Βουλγαρία το πρώτο μισό του 20<sup>ου</sup> αιώνα. Επιχειρεί να καταδείξει πως η διάλυση της Οθωμανικής Αυτοκρατορίας και η συνακόλουθη ανάδυση των εθνικών κρατών οδήγησαν στον βαθμιαίο αφανισμό των μειονοτικών ομάδων. Η εξέλιξη αυτή ήταν αποτέλεσμα της βίαιης διαίρεσης μιας πολυεθνικής αυτοκρατορίας και της επιλογής της γλωσσικής και θρησκευτικής ομοιομορφίας ως κριτηρίων για την οριοθέτηση της εθνικής ταυτότητας.*



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This chapter focuses on the discriminatory policy adopted by Greece and Bulgaria against the minorities living in their territories at the beginning of the 20th century. During 19th century the Balkan Peninsula was still under the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman domination of the region started in the 14th century. For almost four centuries, the Ottomans were the absolute masters of the area. But after the French Revolution (1789) the ideas of self-determination and national liberation were received hopefully in the Balkans. Greeks and Serbians were the leaders in elaborating the new ideas. The Greek War of Independence (1821-1830) was the second uprising to occur in the Balkans, following the Serbian Revolution in 1805, but it was the first successful one and it resulted, nine years later, in 1830, in the creation of the Greek State. The Greek example was followed in the subsequent decades of the 19th century by other people in the Balkans: namely the Serbs, the Romanians, the Montenegrins, the Bulgarians and the Albanians, who revolted in that order. In 1878, after a Russian Turkish War, a Treaty was signed in San Stephano, outside Constantinople. The Treaty provided for a “Great Bulgaria”, whose boundaries included almost the whole geographical region of Macedonia. But “Great Bulgaria” remained only a dream. Five months later, in the summer of 1878, a new treaty was signed in Berlin, providing for a new ethnological picture of the area. Under this treaty Bulgaria became an autonomous state, but lost most of the territorial advantages gained in San Stephano. Finally, in 1908 Bulgaria became an independent nation State.

The disputes between the different Balkan ethnic groups and their enmity against the Ottomans lead to the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913. In the first Balkan War, Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia and

Montenegro joined their forces against the Ottomans. In the second Balkan War, Bulgaria was the enemy for Greece, Serbia and Montenegro. The defeat of the Bulgarian army was followed by loss of territories and a wave of refugees towards the Bulgarian state. But the Balkan Wars were not the only ones this area suffered. One year later, in 1914, the assassination of King Ferdinand in Sarajevo by a group of young Serbs led to the First World War. The Balkan Front, as it is known in historical studies, was one of the main areas of fighting.

The end of the First World War in 1919 was a great relief for the Balkan people. The League of Nations, an international intergovernmental organization established in 1920 by the victorious powers, especially the British and the Americans, constituted a forum where disputes between the countries could be solved in order to sustain peace and to promote international co-operation.

Minorities, especially in Eastern Europe where they lived in great numbers, emerged as the crucial factor for European stability. According to the American president Woodrow Wilson's clauses, every relevant State should act in a positive manner towards its 'racial, linguistic, or religious' minorities. This meant guaranteeing a minimum of civil rights for the minorities, e.g. right of property, religious and educational freedom, right to establish schools, religious and social institutions, etc. In this context every State joining the League was obliged to sign an International Treaty for the protection of its minorities. The Polish Treaty, which was signed in June 1919, served as a model for others, since it preceded them chronologically.

The Balkan countries were inhabited, as we have said, by many different minorities. This was a result of their Ottoman heritage and an outcome of the successive wars. During the Ottoman period, religion was the main distinction between the people. Thus, Muslims were the rulers, the upper class, and Christians (including Greeks, Serbs, Bulgarians etc) were the inferiors, composing the "rum milliet". People did not yet have specific national sentiments. Most of them, especially in the countryside, were uneducated, working peacefully as farmers. There is no doubt that they were good Christians, but only few of them had heard anything about national aspirations, ethnic origin etc. But the emergence of many different nation states in the Balkan Peninsula created a new ethnographical picture in the area. In most of cases the armies followed by the state institutions tried to 'persuade' the new citizens to join their national camp.

Such was the condition in the Balkans at the beginning of the 20th century. At that time, a multicultural, multiethnic region was being violently divided into many nation states. That is why most of the Balkan nation states were populated by different minorities. For example, in 1913 only half of the population of Greek Macedonia was Greek by sentiment or by language. Bulgarians and Muslims continued also to live there on a great proportion. The same was happened in Bulgaria, especially in the south, where a large Greek minority lived peacefully for centuries.

By joining the League of Nations system, Greece was obliged to sign a Treaty for its minorities. It was signed in Sèvres in August 1920 and ratified in Lausanne in July 1923. It declared equal rights for all inhabitants irrespectively their affiliations. The defeated Bulgaria also signed a treaty: the Treaty of Neuilly in November 1919.

But the signing of minority treaties was only one parameter in subsequent policy. Despite its liberal character, the system organized by the League of Nations was far from objective towards minorities. National homogeneity and assimilation of minorities were considered to be the intentional further aims for every nation-State. Compared to the past, when minorities were forcibly



Fig. 1 Bulgarian Refugees from Greece.

expelled or faced severe discrimination, only the methods used were different. In my view the transportation and the implementation of the principles of the League of Nations in the Balkan Peninsula failed to solve the problem of minorities. In the case of the Balkans, in addition to the respect to the rights of minorities, exchange of population was also used. The production of refugees was considered less painful for the States than the maintenance of the minorities.

Despite some recent declarations that, according to many Greek politicians, anyone who accepted Greek culture could become a Greek citizen, Greece introduced a rather discriminatory policy towards its minorities. In fact Greeks were considered to be only those who spoke the Greek language and were, by religion, Orthodox Christians. All the others were denominated “aliens”, and viewed as possible enemies of state sovereignty. So, either they had to leave Greece or else be assimilated by the state. They did not have any other choice.

Following this dogma the Greek state started an assimilatory policy especially in its northern provinces. Bulgarian and Muslim schools, which had operated for decades, closed and the students were obliged to join the Greek schools. Additionally, Greece and Bulgaria signed a Treaty in 1919 providing for voluntary emigration for those belonging to racial, linguistic or ethnic minorities. Under these conditions about 56.000 Bulgarians from Greece left the country, in many cases being forced to emigrate by the Greek authorities.

Greeks in Bulgaria faced a similar situation. The Greek language was prohibited and all the Greek schools closed. Additionally, Bulgarian irredentist organizations forced the Greek minority in Bulgaria to emigrate. Assassinations and extortions were an everyday phenomenon. The revolutionary committee of Burgas, for example, threatened to execute any Greek who did not leave the town within a few days. Bulgarian discrimination against the Greek minority was also viewed in some specific discriminatory laws. As a result, almost all the Greek minority in Bulgaria (35.000) left the country for Greece.

The intolerance of the majority of people towards minority languages could be seen also in the case of those who preferred to stay in their motherland. On 29 September 1924 Nikolaos Politis and Christo Kalfov, the representatives of Greece and Bulgaria, signed a Protocol at the League of Nations in Geneva, respectively, concerning the “Protection of Bulgarian Minority in Greece”. The Politis-Kalfov Protocol obliged Greece to secure fair treatment for all members of the “Bulgarian” minority in Greece. After the Protocol was signed, Greece and the League of Nations engaged in a frenzy of intensive negotiations regarding the details of its implementation.



Fig. 2 Greek Refugees from Bulgaria in Athens.



Fig. 3 Abecedar.

In Greece the reaction against the Protocol peaked because public opinion stood against the recognition of a 'Bulgarian' minority in the northern provinces. Various associations and communities, especially from Greek Macedonia, joined the protest. Moreover, deputies from Macedonian protested strongly in parliament. Eventually, on 2 February 1925, the Greek parliament voted against the Protocol.

But the cancellation of the Protocol did not mean, however, that Greece was going to ignore its obligations towards the minorities. The Secretary General of the League of Nations, Eric Drummond, submitted three questions to the Greek government regarding Slavic speakers in Greece. It was clear that in any case Greece was obliged to adopt some measures concerning the Slav speaking minority in northern provinces. As a result, the Greek government entrusted to a

three-member committee of specialists the preparation of a primer that became known as the “Abecedar”. The primer was in the local Slavic dialect but written in Latin characters. The reason was obvious. Greece did not want to use the Bulgarian alphabet in an effort to express its view that the Slav speakers in Greek Macedonia were neither Bulgarians nor Serbians but rather were without specific ethnic origin, so it was easy for Greece to assimilate them.

The Greek choice caused an immediate reaction by Bulgaria. In an article in a famous Bulgarian newspaper, Ivan Sismanov, a university professor in Sofia, stressed that these measures would reduce the population of Macedonia to a “semi-barbarous” condition. Greek officials argued that Latin characters were easier to learn than Cyrillic ones.

Distributing the primer proved far more difficult than preparing it. However the book was introduced experimentally in late January 1926 in the region of Amyntaion, near Florina. It produced a fierce reaction that continued uninterrupted for several days. Some teachers were harassed and the books were burned. A demonstration was also organized in the town of Amyntaion.

The fires of Amyntaion also consumed the last attempt in Interwar Greece to impose some measures of a minority policy, following the obligations under the League of Nations system. For the Greeks in Bulgaria, although they were very few, such a question never arose.



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Convention between Greece and Bulgaria  
respecting Reciprocal Emigration  
(Neuilly, 27 Novembre 1919)

**Article I**

Les Hautes Parties Contractantes reconnaissent a leurs ressortissants appartenant a des minorities ethniques, de religion ou de langue, le droit d'emigrer librement dans leurs territoires respectifs.

**Article II**

Les Hautes Parties Contractantes s'engagent a faciliter, par tous les moyens don't elles disposent, l'exercice du droit prevu a l'article 1er, et a n'apporter directement ou indirectement aucune entrave a la liberte d'emigration, nonobstant les lois ou reglements contraires, qui, a cet egard, seront reputes sans effet.

En particulier, l'exercice du droit d'emigration ne portera pas atteinte aux droits pecuniaires des emigrants, tels que ces droits se trouvent constitues au moment de l'emigration.

