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Macedonia and NATO: the Implications for the Future

The area and the identity of Macedonia has been a contested terrain for many decades. Leaving aside references to antiquity, its modern form has its roots in the birth of national states in the Balkans in the beginning of the 20th century with the protracted collapse of the Ottoman empire. During the latter's rule the area of Macedonia has been inhabited by various ethnic groups. In the Balkans, Greeks were the first, from the 19th century, to acquire a national identity and to construct a national state. Slavic people, in the Macedonian area, were the last to follow in this road and significant segments of them oscillated for a considerable period between different competing national identities (primarily Greek and Bulgarian). After several local wars and two world wars the Balkan area had been stabilized with established nation states that had, to a great extent, homogenized their populations by all the means available. Nevertheless, there remained several contested areas and significant ethnic minorities within every Balkan nation state. The modern Macedonian issue was born after the Second WW. The northern part of the Macedonian area belonged to Titoist Yugoslavia and was inhabited mainly by Slavs. The southern Macedonian area belonged to Greece, was more or less ethnically homogenized – particularly after the exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey – but also contained a Slavic ethnic minority. Before the 2nd WW the Macedonian area was claimed by Bulgaria also, by trying to patronize its Slavic populations. Yugoslavia, in order to secure its southern area – from both Greece and Bulgaria – promoted a distinct Macedonian identity for the people of its southern area. A necessary corollary of this was

the promotion of irredentism as the whole Macedonian area was considered the rightful home of the Slavomacedonian people. As usually happens in such cases, the creation of a modern national identity tries to find roots in the ancient times: thus, the ridiculous Slavomacedonian claim on Alexander the Great and the ancient Macedonian kingdom that was, in the end, part of the Greek world.

On the other hand, Greece promoted its own irredentism by claiming that the whole Macedonia – and the Macedonian identity – belong to it. The internal Greek politics and particularly the Greek civil war painted in blood this project. The situation was stabilized during the Cold War era as the two main adversaries belonged to different camps. However, with the collapse of the Eastern bloc and particularly with the bloody disintegration of Yugoslavia under the auspices of the Western imperialisms, the whole situation destabilized abruptly. The big Western powers (the US and the EU) strived to expand their spheres of influence in the Balkans. Local elites and emerging bourgeoisies tried to expand their spaces and maneuvered between the big players. All of them fomented nationalisms as a means for their plans.

This is exactly what happened with the small former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM). Once becoming separated from old Yugoslavia, it faced an acute existential problem as its miniscule political and economic size made it almost unviable. On top of that, the increase of its Albanian population endangered further its unity. This resulted in the exaggerated promotion of the Macedonian identity and the concomitant irredentism.

On the other side, Greek capitalism actually invaded economically FYROM's and became one of the main Western economic powers in its economy. This was facilitated by FYROM's drag in the EU's orbit. Ironically, the bigger the political controversies between FYROM and Greece the bigger the economic influence of the latter in the former. Of course, all these under the wings and succumbing to the prevailing interests of the bigger Western powers. This resulted in a new stalemate: Greece blocked the further political integration of FYROM in the EU and NATO unless it dropped its Macedonian claims.

Recently, this stalemate became strained. The resurgence of Russia led the West to try to secure as much of the Balkan area it can under its influence. Thus, the incorporation of Montenegro, FYROM and possibly Serbia into NATO became a priority. This goes together with their incorporation in the EU (despite the increasing tensions between the US and the EU). For this reason, the West proceeds – extremely heavy-handedly and by blatantly neglecting existing political, social and national balances – to rearrange

relationships and even to redraw borders in the very volatile Balkan area (which has produced several wars in the not very distant past).

The Prespes agreement between Greece and FYROM is such a case. First, the West instigated almost openly a governmental change in FYROM by marginalizing a part of its elite that was subservient to the West but at the same time wanted a better deal with Greece. Then, the West employed the weak and completely subservient to US interests SYRIZA government to pass hurriedly a settlement with FYROM. The end result is a disaster for the peoples of the Balkans. Irrespective of the technical details of the agreement which do not matter, its authoritarian imperialist imposition aggravates nationalist tensions in both countries. Of course, the West is indifferent to this so long as it passes its plans. Afterall, in the end, it can play also with local nationalisms.

But there is a problem in these imperialist games: at some point people have to vote. Such a point was the referendum in FYROM. Despite the blatant Western intervention in internal affairs and the lack of even a major political party opposing the agreement (as the FYROM elite is terribly weak, corrupted and depended from the West), the majority of the population voted with their feet and by a meagre participation actually rejected the agreement. This was a terrible slap in the face to the Western arrogance. Furthermore, it showed the rapidly diminishing charm of the EU as the sweetener of joining it (and supposedly gaining economically) was turned down. Spontaneously, the people of the poorer Balkan country have probably sensed something that the Greek people learned through pain and tears the recent years: the EU is not the paradise but the hell for the peoples and for the countries laying in its periphery.

Nevertheless, the West did not learn its lesson and proceeds with greater impertinence. All of them – big and small, from NATO's general secretary and the German foreign ministry to the preposterous Greek SYRIZA and FYROM politicians – pronounce the referendum as a success and demanded the implementation of the agreement. Their ludicrous argument is that 91% of those voting (that were merely the 35% of the eligible voters) supported the agreement. It does not require great intelligence to grasp that this is a direct insult to the very basic rules of democracy. Wouldn't it be better if only a few 'enlightened elites' and foreign agents had voting rights instead of the whole population?

Notwithstanding, the West and its local stooges proceed to try to impose the agreement. Currently, their main effort is to practically bribe and/or blackmail some corrupt FYROM MPs in order to pass it the parliament. Ironically, Alexis Tsipras suggested so; probably banking on his well-known expertise on how turning a popular vote to its opposite. As an

obedient puppet of his masters, he forgets that in this case it is the turn of his government to begin rocking dangerously.

The West's plans for the Balkans are bringing again, few years after the bloody Yugoslavian disintegration, tensions and upheaval in the area. They are fomenting nationalism and promoting imperialist conflict. The peoples of the Balkans have nothing to gain from this.

Particularly for the poor populace of FYROM – and contrary to their elites – their country's participation in the EU and NATO would worsen its condition. These are imperialist organisations infamous for sowing misery and wars in their path. The participation in the EU would make the weak and already dependent FYROM economy even weaker. Greece, and the other euro-peripheral economies have a bitter taste from this participation that made their economies weaker and simple appendages of those of the euro-core economies. It is indicative that other Balkan economies linked to the EU were lucky not to participate at least in the European Monetary Union (EMU). This shielded them from grave consequences during and after the global capitalist crisis of 2008. Moreover, NATO is always the long arm of US aggression and its record is well-known. Instead of stabilization and peace it brings conflicts and war. Its march to the East sows gunpowder in the Balkans.

Concluding, the failure of the Western plans for the Balkans is the only way to keep the possibility of amicable and cooperative relations between the Balkan peoples alive.