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10+1

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

on the

MACEDONIAN QUESTION

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RS

ROSA LUXEMBURG STIFTUNG
OFFICE IN GREECE

*To all those Greek women and men
who spoke out regarding the Macedonian Question
in a documented and critical way
in the decisive decade of the 1990s.
For the women and men who stood up as citizens.*

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Introduction to the English-language edition
The suspended step of the Prespa Agreement



In *The Suspended Step of the Stork*, the drama by Theo Angelopoulos starring Marcello Mastroianni and Jeanne Moreau filmed in 1990 and 1991, a young journalist is struck by the personality of an elderly refugee who lives almost ascetically in a border town of northern Greece. Angelopoulos does not clarify the city in which the film is set; however, practically, it must be located either in Albania or Yugoslavia, whose break up started shortly thereafter. Thus, a borderline film was created on the despair caused by the end of the century and the intersection of two bordering cultures.

This film attracted the interest of public opinion and the press for a long period because in Florina, where some of the filming took place, the film's script reached the hard-right metropolitan bishop of the city, Avgoustinos Kandiotis. Kandiotis, among other things, was a hard-core opponent of any Macedonian lingual or ethnic identity. He believed that the screenplay insulted the nation and religion, and he threatened Angelopoulos with ex-

communication, ordering him to stop filming. Refusing to be intimidated, the director decided to continue. The same held true for his crew. For days, filming in Florina was carried out under terrifying conditions, created by “indignant citizens” led by Kandiotis. The matter took on international dimensions and, naturally, all international players took the side of Angelopoulos – in favour of artistic freedom and against censorship and obscurantism.

A large portion of the *makedonomachoi* (“Macedonian warriors”) of Florina swarmed the city holding black flags and picket signs: Caricatures depicted the film director as a traitor holding a bag with 600 million drachmas, while the church bells tolled mournfully. The bishop – a considerable force in the region – did everything in his power to obstruct the completion and distribution of the film. In the end, despite the excommunication of Angelopoulos and the film’s star Mastroianni, the film was finished and made it to Cannes.

At present, the long-awaited Prespa Agreement is following the trail of Angelopoulos’ film. It was greeted around the world as a model international treaty for security, good neighbourly relations and peace; however, within the two states it remains “suspended” because, even today, there are “Kandiotises” with their own audiences on both sides who are rabidly against it – exactly as in the case of Angelopoulos’ film and the adventures it went through until it could finally see the light of day.

Angelopoulos’ fans do not consider *The Suspended Step of the Stork* one of his better films. However, this did not stop

it from being triumphant. Let it be so with the Prespa Agreement. It is of little importance if the aficionados of the complex Macedonian history and politics will be satisfied with its provisions. The same goes for a line of criticism that is popular in left-wing circles. Illustrating the apparent connections between the resolution of the name dispute and the accession of North Macedonia to NATO and the EU, they dismiss the agreement as an imposed imperialist scheme. This argument misses the bigger picture and postpones a solution to a distant future when conditions will be ripe. We have a different understanding of historical time. We argue that the left should take advantage of any window of opportunity to advance what is the major issue at stake: the emancipation of both the Greek and the Macedonian people from an antagonism that has been fuelling nationalism on both sides of the border. We are aware of the structural framework of the Prespa Agreement. At the same time, we believe that there is more to gain from a resolution today than from a perpetual state of stagnation and conflict.

As these lines are being written, we do not yet know if the Prespa Agreement will be implemented. The referendum that was held in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM)¹ did not bear the desired result for the two governments as far as turnout was concerned,

1. The Republic of Macedonia was admitted to the United Nations in 1993 under the provisional name of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

while the first head that rolled in the name of the agreement in Greece was that of the foreign minister. In short, as we await the successful completion of the constitutional revision required of Skopje under the agreement, to change of its constitutional name to “North Macedonia”, and its ratification by Athens immediately thereafter, we are all on pins and needles. Time is short, and the venture is fragile because political balances are similarly delicate in both states.



In this book, English-speaking audiences will be initiated into the “why” of the Greek reactions, the myths that inundate the Greek side regarding the Macedonian question, haunting the past and raising concerns about the present and the future. For years in our academic, political and personal journeys we were often asked the question: “What do you [Greeks] want from Macedonia?” This question from our interlocutors forced us to make a preliminary explanation that we, contrary to the image that they had of Greece, belonged to those who believed and supported a potential solution, etc. Then we had to explain and unravel the threads of Greek denial, and discuss the complicated journey of the Balkans, where the threads of minorities, border changes, nationalism and blood are still visible. With the English edition, we are pleased to expound on what we have discussed in congresses, in corridors, in bars and in groups of friends, in an effort to show the irrational roots of an unreasonable stance.

Our greatest pleasure, however, is based on the hope that our book will soon cease to be useful in the present; it will rather be a review of a matter that life, political initiative and the actions of the peoples of the Balkans will have resolved definitively.

Some strive in vain, believing that “history teaches”. And yet; if history could teach, then we would all have grown wiser a long time ago, and the coexistence of nations would be an easier affair. Things are not at all like this: History unfortunately does not teach – all serious historians accept this – so people and nations are forced to live with their mistakes and passions. If at some point they manage to distance themselves from those mistakes and passions and reflect in a self-critical way, then we can hope that the pages of miscommunication will be replaced by a better story. That is the story that this book wishes to serve as regards the relationship between the two states.

Since the early 1990s, both countries have been “antiquity-struck” to a stifling degree. Athens wore blinders and obstinately insisted on a position that was internationally problematic and humiliatingly unfair. At the same time, in response, examples of being “antiquity-struck” started appearing in Skopje. Nationalism, like foolishness, knows no borders. The situation seemed to be at a permanent impasse, and those of us who insisted on the necessity and possibility of cooperation between the peoples in resolving the problem and on the principles of being a good neighbour were a minority in Greece.

So, something has changed in Greece now. The Prespa Agreement is an indication of this. For the first time in many years, we understand that the obstinate nationalists are not the only players in the game. The governmental shift in Skopje and the commitment of Athens to the prospect of a solution have created a platform for negotiation and dialogue that may completely change the dead-end image that we had become used to.

We wrote this book in Greek in spring 2018 at a critical moment, when negotiations between Greece and FYROM were presented as “frozen”. It was written in the heat of the moment and aimed to show that there is a current of critical thought in Greek society that, since the 1990s, has resisted the nationalist frenzy, the latent and explicit racism towards the “Skopje statelet” (as it is called, in an unacceptable and derogatory fashion, in dominant Greek nationalist discourse). We were very concerned that we would come face-to-face with everything we had experienced back then, in the 1990s. We were wrong, and it had never felt better to be wrong: Greek society showed that it had changed in its stance. The rallies could not overturn the negotiations, few turned up and, most of all, they showed the political and actual inadequacy of the position that continues to deny reality: the reality that it is not possible in the 21st century for a society to deny another its right to self-determination. We are very happy that this edition and this part of the book’s journey has coincided with and contributed to a decisive step forward.

At present, when the Prespa Agreement seems to be suspended in mid-air on both sides of the border, perhaps it would be of value to remember *The Suspended Step of the Stork*. It took time and persistence in the end and it was not merely completed; it was triumphant.



As a matter of principle, the structure and content of the book was retained, with the minimum necessary adaptations for English-speaking readers. At the beginning of each chapter, however, a paragraph has been added in italics, as a type of introduction and initiation for (non-Greek) readers to the ten plus one questions.

This book was translated first from Greek to Macedonian, so this edition is its second translation. We would like to thank Polis Publications in Athens, the Helsinki Citizens Assembly for the Macedonian translation, and the Office in Greece of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation for the English translation. The rest, as usual, weighs on us.

Athens/New York
October 2018

To get the conversation going



This short book was written in question and answer format. Our aim is for anyone concerned with the infamous Macedonian question to be able to read it. We want to offer a codified and critical tour of the most widespread positions that, in our opinion, compose the great national narratives in Greece, and to offer a response to them. We have in mind the ever-increasing number of people who want to challenge – what was until very recently – the sad monotony of views regarding the Macedonian question in public discourse. But it’s more than that. We are also interested in conversing with those who wish to challenge their own myths, who feel that the stereotypical repetition of the slogan “Macedonia is Greek” merely prolongs the impasse in the relations between the two states. It is for all these reasons that we wanted to write in the same style in which we speak: simply, and not strictly scientifically – and definitely not quasi-scientifically. This book is not addressed to the few or to experts.

We gleaned ten plus one questions that run through public discourse in Greece and which, regardless of their

differences, all converge on one point: Dealing with the Macedonian identity as “nonexistent” and, in the end, entrapping Greek politics in an ineffective and unjust stance regarding the well-known matter of our neighbour’s name. Expressing these questions was easy and difficult at the same time. It was easy, because many of these positions have been stereotypically repeated for years – definitely since the early 1990s – to such a degree that they have become ingrained in everyone’s mind. And difficult, because while carefully observing the recent rallies held in Athens and Thessaloniki regarding the “name”, we ascertained that there were very few arguments posed by the attendees and speakers of the rallies. What was most dominant was a sentiment of “betrayal”, and a denunciation of it, and a feeling of national pride, without, however, substantiating what it is based on.

This is, of course, one of the basic functions of myths: they create a reality which is then reproduced as such, without anyone dealing with its core, its “founding myth”. In this text we attempt to reconstruct them, to show that much of what is being said here and there, dominating public discourse, simply *does not stand to reason*.

These are not just “lies”. These narratives mobilise consciences, they affect behaviours, they reproduce emotional identification and they create alternative realities. On the other hand, as is the case with all stereotypes and easy positions, there is some truth to them; they do latch on to certain elements of reality – it could be no other

way. There are fragments in the myths surrounding the Macedonian question that do stand to reason. But that is not the matter at hand. The issue here is their overall function and the view they compose, as well as the way in which their consolidation has led portions of society to a denial of reality.

We will put it simply. In the discussion surrounding the formation of the identities of the political communities called nations, the most important factor is not whether their historical assumptions are documented or not; that is a minor factor. The important issue is whether the way societies think about their past helps communication and cooperation or whether it intensifies transnational competitiveness and mistrust. While myths are thought up because they have a practical political value, there comes a time when they become potentially durable. Thus, in the end, societies are held captive by them. This is what happened to us in Greece with the Macedonian question. Therefore, our main problem with our national narratives surrounding the matter does not merely lie in their inaccuracy.

Our main concern is that the myths in question have kept Greece entrapped for more than a generation, resulting in the establishment of a condition of total denial of our neighbouring country's identity, the continuation of insecurity in a geopolitical balance that is fragile to begin with, and the wasting of a disproportionately large amount of diplomatic and political capital at a moment when Greece had, and continues to have, other

much more important priorities. The impact of such narratives, which were shaped or rekindled in the early 1990s, have been negative overall. One could cynically maintain that back then they had the practical value of being expended within Greece by most of the era's political parties. However, it quickly became apparent that Greece's political leadership had fallen into its own trap. The result? For years Greece had landmined any prospect of resolving the conflict between the two states.

The present picture is much more promising. On its own, the major difference in the size and passion of recent rallies in comparison to those of the 1990s shows that there has been a gradual subsidence of our national mythologies. But that does not suffice. It is of value for us to investigate the certainties and question the axioms that are casually thrown around in public discourse. For years, the Macedonian question was the great collective censor and self-censor of Greek public life: Repressed truths and the feeling of a secret locked away determined the way in which Greek society dealt with what stood right before it, but which it refused to see. When a television channel chose to blank out the name "Macedonia" in an international basketball match, it was essentially doing exactly what Greece's political leadership had opted to do: When reality does not agree with us, too bad for reality.

The wound is gaping. It is festering and must be dealt with quickly. The longer we leave it, the deeper it will go, poisoning coming generations. We believe that those

nations which have courageously confessed, first and foremost to themselves, their bitter truths and closeted secrets can only emerge as winners. Unfortunately, Greek society has not taken daring steps of self-criticism and chooses to cover up various traumatic incidents of its past, especially those that it calls “national issues”, so that it doesn’t have to stand up to itself with daring. So, let us confront our insecurities and our phobias in order to look at what and how much they are worth. It is to this therapeutic function that the following pages want to contribute.

Athens
March 2018

1. “But isn’t the name of our neighbouring country a ‘national matter’ for Greece?”



So-called “national matters” have a unique place in Greek public discourse, as they are permeated by a basic, informal rule: Marginalising any voice that goes against the standing positions of Greek foreign policy on matters that have to do with the country’s international relations. Since the 1990s, the Macedonian question has been the go-to “national matter”, which resulted in censoring and criminalising voices that spoke in favour of an agreement with our neighbouring country. The censorship and self-censorship mechanism surrounding the matter – which is illustrated by the fact that for years in Greek public discourse there could be no reference to the “Macedonian question”, only the “Skopjan issue” – makes it necessary to discuss from the very beginning on what constitutes a “national matter”.



Let’s start with something simple: What exactly constitutes a “national matter” in Greece? If you actually think about it, often the most important problems we are fac-

ing are not considered “national matters”. Thus, for example, while after 2009 everyone agreed that the public debt was the country’s gravest problem, we rarely characterised it a “national matter”, with the gravity that that phrase bears in public discourse. Thus, on the matter of the debt, everyone is entitled to an opinion and may express their own solution: From enforcing austerity or productive reconstruction, to writing off the debt or reintroducing the drachma. On this matter, we know that, as a society, we do not agree. And rightly so; this is a democracy and disagreement is one of its basic components.

But what about in the case of so-called “national matters”? Here, things are different. There are matters on which disagreement is considered “treason” or “short-changing ourselves”. There is no acceptable counterargument. There is only a dominant view, which demands that it be the only one. In Greece, the Macedonian question has been a perfect example. For many years any disagreement on the handling of our foreign policy was considered tantamount to high treason. Not enough years have passed for us to forget that in the early 1990s some citizens were dragged into court and convicted with heavy sentences because they handed out leaflets calling for the peaceful coexistence of the peoples of the Balkans; nor have we forgotten the TV news and newspaper front pages targeting anyone who dared express any view other than the dominant national position.

Discourse on national matters reviles any deviation from its own correctness and is reproduced by colonising

the past with its own pronouncements and aphorisms. It would be the equivalent of blasphemy in theology. This discourse dictates the visible and invisible, the existent and nonexistent. It has its areas that are off-limits, which, in turn, operate as a refuge for our national community. No matter how much we ruminate about the quote by poet Dionysios Solomos that “the nation must learn to consider as national whatever is true”, in practice we fortify ourselves behind myths and fairy tales. Or, to use the words of Tzvetan Todorov, one of the greatest thinkers of our times: “The emotional charge of everything related to the totalitarian past is huge, and people who are subject to it mistrust all attempts at clarification, all calls for analysis prior to the making of judgments.”²

So, with regard to the Macedonian question, Greek society chose for years to trap itself, to move onwards with an emotional charge, to distrust any voice appealing for an examination of the true facts and actual dimensions of the matter. This situation propelled the self-entrapment of Greek diplomacy, which, while perfunctorily seeing that we were walking into a wall, did not have the courage to admit it. It just whispered it awkwardly. This course was, to a great extent, based on a rudimentary mechanism of cynical repression: Repressing the fact that what we considered a clearly “na-

2. Tzvetan Todorov, *Hope and Memory: Lessons from the Twentieth Century*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003, 119.

tional matter” – exclusively ours and ours alone – was obviously the vital “national matter”, the basis for the existence, of an entire country. When this repression mechanism did not work effectively, cynicism took its place: “The most convincing argument for national rights is power.” In relation to our northern neighbours any comparisons were completely in our favour.

On this matter the Greek side made four vital errors, which determined the development and rampant growth of the problem in time:

Firstly, it is wrong in principle to want to impose a name on another country, no matter how much its name may upset you. We are not investigating here the reasonableness or otherwise of this upset. In international law, peoples’ right to self-determination self-evidently includes their right to choose their name. In practice, things become even worse when some residents of this country have been called by this name for many decades and have been recognised as such by everyone, including Greece.

Secondly, it is wrong in hindsight to believe that you will impose your view because since you are more powerful in the negotiation in question. This view shows a limited understanding of the overall geopolitical correlations, as well as an inability to understand that, outside of our limited “national audience”, anyone else hearing the idea of imposing a name on another country would likely characterise it as strange, irrational or aggressive.

Thirdly, it is an error in logic to correlate nationalism unequivocally with the name of this country. By forbidding someone the capacity of officially having the name they believe is theirs and with which they have grown up, you are not limiting their fanaticism on the matter of identity. As a rule, the opposite usually occurs. Greek inflexibility fuelled the raw nationalism of the Gruevski government (2006–2016), as it is so eloquently illustrated by the statues of Bucephalus, Alexander the Great's horse, that filled Skopje. Any rational person in Greece or elsewhere in the world understands that one of the reasons that Macedonian nationalism intensified over the last decade was Greece's refusal to recognise its identity. Gruevski is, among other things, a child of the 1994 embargo and the 2008 veto.

Fourthly, it is a theoretical error to believe that nationalism has borders. Greece's uncompromising position helped Gruevski's nationalists to power, and it further fuelled the growth of xenophobia and nationalism within Greece. The rallies of the 1990s were the birthplace of a new national-mindedness, and within it appeared – for the first time in relatively large numbers and, most importantly, with legitimisation, due to the matter at hand – the neo-Nazis of Golden Dawn.³ At pres-

3. Golden Dawn is a Greek neo-Nazi party. Founded in the 1980s, it remained marginal until the Macedonian rallies of the early 1990s. It entered the Greek parliament in 2012 amid the financial and political crisis and remains the major party of the extreme

ent we are witnessing a creeping recovery of aggressive nationalism: The calls for military action, the radicalisation of senior clerics, the “wet dreams” of retired servicemen about a Greater Greece, the leadership of Golden Dawn – which is on trial – feeling emboldened and participating actively in a mass cross-party rally.

Treating the Macedonian question as a “national matter”, as a taboo, had, until recently, led to an impasse; an impasse that was not being confronted, even though Greece had started down a path of practical penance with the acceptance of the compound name. However, this development was suspended in mid-air, since the sentiment that this was a “national matter” cancelled out any possibility for real discussion, the acceptance of new realities, and the corresponding moves.

At present, both countries have a unique opportunity to change the playing field and decisively move to resolve the name issue. Such a development would be positive for Greece on several levels, both in regard to the matters of principle mentioned above and in pragmatic terms. It would be positive because it would strengthen Greece’s negotiating position in general on the serious matters it is facing in our “neighbourhood” and in the EU in general. It would be positive because it would be a decisive response to bigoted nationalism and the emerging new national-mindedness. It would be positive because it

right in Greek politics. Currently its leadership is on trial for a number of violent and murderous incidents.

would show that there are no unsolvable issues and matters that are taboo. It would be positive because it would contribute to the creation of trust between neighbouring countries, which would marginalise nationalism beyond our borders, while at the same time contribute to avoiding intercommunity conflict – which would be in the interest of stability in our region as a whole. Lastly, it would be positive because it would allow us to turn to a discussion of the real geopolitical challenges – can we really be discussing our neighbour’s name and not the war in Syria? – and the most important national matter: Greek society in the 21st century. Let us focus on something worth our while.

2. “Macedonia has been Greek since antiquity.
How can some people appropriate all that
history today?”

The connection between the ancient past and present discourse – as, for example, in the case of the instrumentalisation of Alexander the Great – was the favourite argument of nationalists on both sides of the border. Especially in Greece, the emotional reaction to the prospect of reaching a solution between the two countries was based on the argument that this would be a cession of our ancient Greek past to a competitive nation. The range of this belief is such that it is impossible for anyone to face the Macedonian question without investigating the ways in which invoking our ancient past will operate as an instrument of fixation for extreme nationalist positions.



This question highlights the difference between lies and myths. The distress it reflects is not related to some lie, but to an exceptionally widespread narrative: That the present discussion on Macedonia is related to our ancient heritage, specifically, the intellectual rights on ancient Macedonia.

This myth is based on something that is, to begin with, pragmatically correct. Indeed, many historians and archaeologists agree that the language of the ancient Macedonians was a Greek dialect (initially Doric, then Attic and, later, Hellenistic). Also, most researchers agree that Slavic tribes settled in Macedonia (and other areas in Greece) from the 7th century AD onwards. Then – we keep forgetting this – the Macedonian region had a number of sovereigns. The Byzantine Empire, the Bul-

garian state, the Byzantines once more, the Latin state, the Despotate of Epirus, the Serbian kingdom, the Empire of Nicaea, then the Byzantine state once again, and the Ottoman Empire, are – in brief – the various sovereign formations that Macedonia was part of from the 9th to 15th centuries. The main ethnic groups of the region were Greek-speaking and Slavic-speaking “Romans” – what we call as a whole, figuratively, “Byzantines”. Alongside them there was, as early as in the late 14th century, a significant Ottoman presence: Thessaloniki finally fell in 1430 to the Ottomans, who had already conquered it once before in 1388. Therefore, the geographical region of Macedonia was an area of osmosis of different ethnic and language communities.

But let us focus on the first half of this illustrative narrative: The ancient Macedonians were a Greek tribe. There are other historical views but let us keep this one. However, this conclusion cannot in any way be correlated to the question of how a country will be named in the 20th and 21st centuries. Greek public opinion must comprehend this “misunderstanding”, regardless of what Macedonia was in antiquity and what it is now. Not just Macedonia; England, France, Germany, Albania, Turkey, and so on. The Greek state has a pressing responsibility to get this simple message through to our society, which is intoxicated by a memory struck by antiquity.

Furthermore, our ancient heritage played a minimal role in the emergence of the collective identities that were formed in the Macedonian region in the 19th centu-

ry. Although many people in Greece insist that the main issue is our relationship to the ancient past, what people have called the “Macedonian question” since the 19th century is a very modern affair. Specifically, it is an affair that is related to the crisis in the Ottoman Empire in the late 19th century and the intensification of competition on how its territories would be split. That is when Europe discovered the Macedonian question: It is a modern matter related to the coexistence and competition between ethnic groups in a common geographical region that would soon become an area of military confrontation between various state entities; with weapons; and no Bucephaluses.

So, since the late 19th century, the words “Macedonia”, “Macedonians” and “Macedonian” all meant – in Greece and beyond – the geographical region and some populations, not the intellectual rights on Alexander the Great. Later, in the mid-20th century, “Macedonia” was the name the entire planet called the one of the constituent republics of federal Yugoslavia. This is documented in dictionaries, newspapers and agreements between states of the times. Greek geography schoolbooks, for example, included maps in which the neighbouring country was called by its name: Socialist Republic of Macedonia. Nowhere in this discussion is antiquity mentioned. This dimension was added very recently. Thus, the new Greek national narrative starts from a relatively documented position (the “Greekness” of the ancient Macedonians) and makes a massive leap through time, covering 2,000 years,

that has nothing to do with the historical dimensions of the matter. So, if the current claims (lands, names, populations) of national states were accepted using arguments that reach back two millennia, the whole planet would erupt. Thankfully, and this may be something that we perhaps do not comprehend in Greece, such arguments as a rule are cause for political amusement.

It is on this “misunderstanding”, this historical anachronism on the meaning antiquity holds in modern identities, that the myth has been established that “Macedonia has been Greek since antiquity”. The side effects of accepting this are traumatic, as they shift public discourse and, through it, collective emotion to matters that are completely unrelated to present-day reality and the matter of the name. The same path is followed by nationalists on both sides. Former prime minister Gruevski’s catastrophic policies attempted to convince, on his side, that his compatriots were not Slavs but, rather, the descendants of Alexander the Great – and thus, down the rabbit hole of collective delusion, if not of a complete meltdown, we went. The result was the instrumentalisation of the ancient past and a cataclysm of images of Alexander the Great and Bucephalus in squares, on tablecloths, on coins and on paper tissues.

So, has Macedonia been Greek since antiquity? Our answer is that this question is not related to what a state will be called today, more than 2,000 years later. Reality, contemporary state life, and international relations recognise neither historical patents nor intellectual rights.

And thankfully so; because if they did, humanity would not have known a single moment of peace, a fact that all the nations of the world might admit in some moment of calm contemplation.

3. “Isn’t there only one Macedonia and isn’t it Greek?”

In 1992 major rallies were held in Greece in opposition to the use of the term “Macedonia” by the neighbouring state. These rallies had the support of the entire political world (apart from sections of the left), the church, the military and all state mechanisms. The main slogan running through all of them was, “There is only one Macedonia and it is Greek”. Recent rallies – much smaller in size and dynamism – against the Greece–FYROM agreement brought this slogan back to the forefront, supporting that ceding the term Macedonia violates the “Greekness” of the region.



“Why do we want to forget that Greek Macedonia became Greek during this century, through a heartbreaking uprooting of populations, with mutual population exchanges, with the arrival of Greeks from Asia Minor following the Asia Minor Catastrophe? The present composition of Macedonia’s population is, for the most part, the result of population exchanges, and not the survival of indigenous Greek populations.” So said prominent historian Philippos Iliou in 1993,⁴ in response to the most widespread sentiment of the time: “Macedonia was and is Greek.”

The data is crystal clear: There was never just one Macedonia, nor was it ever just Greek. On the contrary – from the 19th century onwards there were numerous maps in

4. In an interview, published in *Ψηφίδες ιστορίας και πολιτικής του εικοστού αιώνα* [Fragments of history and politics of the 20th century], Athens: Athens, 2007, 53–61.

circulation that provided conflicting possibilities on the future of Macedonia. There are Greek, Bulgarian, Serbian and Macedonian maps, all indicating the same geographical region and envisioning its occupation and incorporation by the corresponding nation-states (or the creation of a new one in the case of the Macedonians). The reason these maps exist, along with their corresponding visions of the future, is related to the coexistence – which continues to a certain degree – of various ethnic and religious groups of the southern Balkans in the geographical region of Macedonia. They are almost all in attendance. So, Macedonia became the go-to example of ethnic diversity. The “Macedonian salad”, the renowned “macédoine”, which consists of several different vegetables or fruits, highlights the image of the region: A bowl, Macedonia, that includes a variety of ingredients.

But that which for most Europeans is a menu choice, for Greeks is a trauma. You don’t find Macedonian salads in any Greek restaurants, since “Macedonia is Greek”. And yet, even in Greek school, we learn that the geographical region of Macedonia, after the Balkan Wars, First World War and the Asia Minor Catastrophe, was divided into three parts: The Greek part, the Bulgarian part, and the part that would become one of the components of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Therefore, from very early on, there was never just one Macedonia: There was only one united Macedonia during the era of the Ottoman Empire, when, indeed, the geographical region of Macedonia was part of a large

multiethnic empire. It is only Ottoman Macedonia that was ever just one. From that point onwards, Macedonia was divided into three parts, and, therefore, it is not just one, nor is it exclusively Greek. Greek Macedonia is geographically determined: it became ethnically homogenous with the Greek-Turkish and Greek-Bulgarian population exchanges (namely, the departure of the Muslim residents and parts of the Slavic-speaking population and the inflow of Orthodox refugees) and the oppression of minority populations from the interwar period onwards with the aim of assimilating (Hellenising) them. That is how most countries in the world operated at the time: They aimed to make their new territories ethnically and linguistically homogenous.

At present, discourse on the Macedonian question wants to control memory, namely our “necessary oblivion”, by enlarging some events through manipulative lenses and forgetting others. This discourse is reproduced by populating the past with its own pronouncements and aphorisms. One such aphorism is that “Macedonia is Greek”. Thus, discourse is subsumed by a behaviour, which, to put it bluntly, could be characterised as perverse: The issue is there and we are ignoring it, because we are simply praising the memory that we are creating. The fact that it is a delusion does not concern us. Since “there is only one Macedonia and it is Greek”, there is nothing to discuss.

Thus, the slogan “there is only one Macedonia and it is Greek” offers to the ears of anyone hearing it a map of

the modern Balkans with a single connotation: That Greece is laying claim to a foreign territory. Whether those expressing it understand it or not, whether they insist that it is a defensive slogan and not irredentist, the claim of a single and Greek Macedonia sounds like an imperialistic plan that will change the defined borders of the region. Thus, the myth in question is not merely unsupported. It is also dangerous.

Even if it is only for this reason, the Macedonian question must gradually be retrieved from the off-limits area and be placed in an area where it can be discussed. Practically, to begin with, this means *reconstituting* everything that happened. This is the groundwork of any reasonable approach. It is a difficult mission: Separating history from propaganda. These are the steps that need to be taken as quickly as possible, if the two states reach an agreement on the name. There is a lot of work to be done on both sides.

4. “But is there such a thing as a Macedonian nation? Isn’t it nonexistent?”

Since 1992, Greek nationalism and Greek politics have often returned to this argument that aims to present the claims of the Macedonian nation for self-determination as a construct (see below) or a fraud, as there is no such thing. This is the go-to argument that has been used to dispute the core of the right for self-determination of the citizens of FYROM. It is part of an overall rhetoric in Greece that professes that there are no “Macedonians”, is no “Macedonian nation” or “Macedonian language”, and, therefore, professes that certain nations do not exist, regardless of whether there are people who believe that they belong to them. This notion maintains that there are authentic and inauthentic nations.



A nation is a political community that expresses its solidarity in its desire to be housed within a state. The state, the nation-state, since the 19th century, is the historical home of the nation. This explains why nations, which are products of political modernity, did not exist – and, furthermore, definitely did not exist in the way we perceive them – in antiquity or in the Middle Ages. In order to resolve a crucial misunderstanding (also related to Question 2), of course there were Greeks in antiquity, but they did not constitute a nation as we now perceive it. Nor, certainly, did the Germans or the French of the Middle Ages compose a nation. The modern Greek nation emerged through the need to cohouse a state entity – to put it simply, let’s say from the late 18th century onwards. This is not a Greek particularity. It holds true for everyone.

Therefore, if there is a group of people who believe and feel that they belong to a community, which they define in a certain way, then, logically, it cannot be non-existent. To put it more simply: If a nation exists, it cannot – because we do not like the fact – cease to exist. The existence of this nation may cause us to feel insecure, we may believe that it is undermining geopolitical balances, we may believe that it does not share the common values of our culture. All these points are valid subjects of discussion. However, we cannot, for these reasons, deny that nation's existence. If there are people who define themselves as Macedonians and believe, and in fact have done so for decades, that they belong to the Macedonian nation, there is no reasonable scope in which we can claim that they are “nonexistent”.

This simple syllogism is what Greece's and Bulgaria's positions contradict. The dominant notion in both countries is that there is no Macedonian nation. For Bulgaria, the Macedonian nation is nonexistent and the people who feel they are Macedonians are just Bulgarians. In Greece, on the other hand, the dominant view is that a nation composes a “tribal” group and, therefore, it members do not have the right to belong to such a nation, as they are not “tribal” descendants of the ancient Macedonians. The power of this unhistorical uptake regarding the nation in Greece also becomes evident from the fact that a significant number of our compatriots do not consider the American nation to be a nation, since it consists of hundreds of “tribes”. In Bulgaria, the dominant notion

is based mainly on language, which is, naturally, unable to understand why the Danish, Norwegians and Swedes are different nations. Let us remember that a common language did not stand in the way of a civil war between the Serbs, Croats and Bosnian Muslims in Yugoslavia.

For Greece things are more complicated. The “non-existent Macedonian nation” is also related to the historical and overall refusal of Greece to recognise the Macedonian national identity domestically, to begin with: Namely, to recognise that in the prefectures of northern Greece there was and still is – to a significantly lesser degree at present – a minority community of people who self-identify, either nationally or ethnically or culturally, as Bulgarians and/or Macedonians. The refusal to recognise this identity within Greece is also the point from which we set off down the path of denying it abroad, following the collapse of Yugoslavia.

One wonders: “How can two neighbouring nations deny a third nation its existence?” Maybe something’s not right here. Maybe something is indeed false.

We mentioned above that in the 19th century the geographical region of Macedonia was under Ottoman rule. This land was home to Christians, who were mainly Greek- and Bulgarian-speaking; Muslims, who spoke every language you might encounter in the Balkans; and Jews, who at times lived harmoniously and at others in conflict. Various statistics of the era illustrate the multi-ethnic makeup of the population. So, in 1907 Thessaloniki’s *vilayet* (as the Ottomans called their provinces) con-

tained 419,604 Muslims, 263,881 Greeks, 155,710 Bulgarians, 52,935 Jews and 20,846 Vlachs. The picture was similar in the north. In the vilayet of Monastir (present-day Bitola), 204,587 Muslims lived side by side with 203,796 Greeks and 188,566 Bulgarians. This distinction between Greeks and Bulgarians seemed to express an ecclesiastical division, as the world of Orthodox Christians was split into two communities: Greek-speakers and Bulgarian-speakers.

This distinction had created an ecclesiastical schism: In 1879 the Bulgarian Exarchate was established – in conflict with the Patriarchate of Constantinople – and then transformed into the autocephalous Bulgarian Orthodox Church. At some point, the element determining national identity, or, to be more precise, predisposition, was ecclesiastical membership, and not mother tongue: Those who were with the Patriarchate were perceived of and were identified as Greeks, while those with the Exarchate were Bulgarians. Subsequently, in 1878, the modern Bulgarian state was founded and the Bulgarian-speaking residents of Ottoman Macedonia and later – following the Balkan Wars – of Greek Macedonia found themselves facing an existential question: What would their relationship to the new state be?

Those living in the region of Greek eastern Macedonia had few choices. Their proximity to Bulgaria and the agreement of the Greek and Bulgarian population exchanges signed by both countries in 1919 determined their path. Even though the exchange was not obligato-

ry, the majority of Greeks permanently abandoned Bulgaria and, similarly, most Bulgarians left Greece. Those who remained essentially accepted their “Bulgarisation” or “Hellenisation”, respectively. Subsequently, Greece and Bulgaria, in the context of a gentlemen’s agreement, accepted that each does not have a minority in the territory of the other. Since then, the matter has been closed.

The situation proved to be more complicated in Greek central and western Macedonia. The people who spoke Bulgarian – not the official language, certainly, but dialects quite close to it – had no intention of going to Bulgaria, a country with which they shared no significant connection and which was not geographically close. Those people, who had settled mainly in towns and villages, started to use the geographical attributive “Macedonian” to describe their identity – an identity that was neither Greek nor Bulgarian. So, what was it? In 1924 Greek writer Stratis Myrivilis, in the first edition of his well-known novel *Life in the Tomb*, described them as follows:

These villagers, whose language the Bulgarians and Serbs understand excellently, resent the former because they took their children into the army. They hate the latter who mistreat them as Bulgarians. They look upon us passing Romioi with sympathetic curiosity, because we are genuine spiritual subjects of the Patrik, namely, the ‘Orthodox Patriarchate of Constantinople’ ... However, they wish to be neither ‘Bulgar’, nor ‘Srrp’, nor ‘Grrts’. Only ‘Makedon Ortodox’.

Another Greek writer, Penelope Delta – who is clearly beyond any (national) doubt – wrote in *The Secrets of the Swamp* in 1937:

Back then, Macedonia was an amalgam of all Balkan nationalities. Greeks, Bulgarians, Romanians, Serbs, Albanians, Christians and Muslims, living in disarray under the heavy yoke of the Turks. Their language was the same, Macedonian, an amalgam of Slavic and Greek, with Turkish words thrown in. As it was in Byzantine times, the populations were so mixed that you could hardly tell a Greek from a Bulgarian – the two dominant tribes. Their only national conscience was Macedonian.

These peoples' identity in post-Ottoman times was forged mainly through where they lived: In Macedonia. In the age of ethnic groups, the geographical attributive “Macedonian” was gradually – and it was a strictly gradual process in contrast to what is supported by official Macedonian historiography – forged into a national attributive. This happened for a portion of this population. Some preferred to be Hellenised – the so-called “Greco-mans” – and others, mainly in eastern Macedonia, preferred to be Bulgarised.

Initially the official Greek state accepted the fact that there were communities within its territories that spoke another (namely, non-Greek) language and declared themselves as Macedonians. Thus, in the official Greek census of 1928, more than 60,000 citizens, their vast ma-

majority in northern Greece, stated – and let us keep this in mind, regardless of how correct the census’ numbers are – that their mother tongue was “Slavomacedonian”. If in 1928 the question regarding the mother tongue allowed for such an answer, things must have changed in time. According to the new priorities of the official Greek state, the speakers of “Slavomacedonian” had to forget it, because that language simply “does not exist”. Anxious about the existence of the minority, the Greek state started to apply an extensive regime of suppression, at the core of which was eradicating and silencing that which was different: Everyone in the north of Greece – and not just in the north – knew of villages whose names were changed in order to sound more “Greek”, but there are few who know or who wish to remember the measures taken to silence the language of the “locals” (see Question 7), and even fewer remember the arrests, beatings and exiling of “dangerous” minorities. The above is commonplace in most historical narratives in Greece, no matter what perspective the historian adopts as regards their broader position on the Macedonian question. In any case, the fact that they reflect unpleasant memories is not reason enough for them to be erased.

5. “Okay, it’s not nonexistent.
But it is artificial. Didn’t Tito create it?”

This argument is obviously connected to the previous one. It is very popular in conservative and far-right circles, as it attempts to present the “problem” as a creation of the politics of socialist Yugoslavia. Due to the unique place the Macedonian question holds in the consolidation of Greek anti-communism (see below), this argument has taken on a life of its own and is presented as a more documented, quasi-scientific version of the position on the “nonexistent” nation.



The belief that the Macedonian nation is artificial, a creation of Josip Broz Tito, leader of socialist Yugoslavia, is a variation of the previous question. The syllogism insinuated is simple: It does exist, but it is not authentic, and, therefore, does not deserve a place that is equal to the other nations of the planet.

Once again, we find ourselves facing a selective reading of reality. Naturally, it was the policy of federal Yugoslavia – a policy based on recognising the different characteristics within a multiethnic state – that first recognised the statehood of the Macedonian nation, with the founding of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia. However, this fact does not negate its existence prior to this point in time.

In the previous question, we saw data from the historical course of this nation from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. One event stands out in this course: In the

summer of 1903, on 20 July, on feast day of the Prophet Elijah, mass demonstrations broke out in different areas around the Ottoman Empire, disputing Ottoman rule. The initiative for what became known as the Ilinden Uprising belonged to the Internal Macedonian-Adrianople Revolutionary Organisation, a conspiratorial and revolutionary movement that sought autonomy for Macedonia. It was no coincidence that the uprising has been the main national holiday since the era of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia, as it is considered the date on which the Macedonian nation appeared on the historical stage.

There are different evaluations of the importance and content of this uprising, often reflecting corresponding national priorities. Thus, in Greece the dominant view is that the uprising did not, in the end, seriously challenge the Ottoman Empire. It is often repeated that it was an initiative of Bulgarian nationalists, which, as is self-evident, is also supported by Bulgarian historiography, in the context of its standard position that Macedonians cannot be anything other than Bulgarians.

The question here, however, is not whether the Ilinden Uprising was a Macedonian revolution of the people, or just an “invented tradition”. It could, after all, be both, to be frank.

What we would like, in every way possible, is to highlight here is that nations are by definition composed, they are constructed. When it happened is immaterial. The important thing is the process. The notion that nations are created – and are not “awakened” from an eter-

nal slumber, for example – is commonplace in contemporary theory and is based on the acceptance that nations are collective political subjects that use national states as the dominant criterion by which they organise the world. Down this path, every nation has its own journey of creation and its own material.

The rule is that the elites mobilise before the creation of the state in order to help spread the national idea, but the creation of the state is that which largely allows the dissemination and establishment of the national idea throughout the entire population. Our northern neighbour is no exception to this rule.

The fact alone that the process by which the Macedonian nation was composed came later chronologically does not prove something. There is no perceived or other type of time limit on deciding whether a nation is “genuine” or “artificial”. This distinction does not exist. Nor is the foundation of a state a criterion by which to judge whether it is supported by an existent or nonexistent nation. Let us think about it another way: Would one dare question the Italian or the German nation? And yet, Italian and German unification is an affair completed as recently as 1871. Can anyone today deny the Kurdish national movement, by invoking the fact that there is no official Kurdish state yet? So, things are more complicated than our own wishes for a clear distinction between “authentic” and “artificial” nations.

To begin with, a people’s national conscience is formed – in political terms – as a result of their shared will. “The

existence of a nation ... is a daily referendum,” wrote the French father of the national idea, Ernest Renan, characteristically, in order to highlight the dynamic dimension of the nation: Only due to this daily approval by the people that espouse it can it exist. Without it, there is no nation. This dimension coexists with the multicultural dimension. Most European nations are based on the idea of community: Common descent, language, religion and traditions. When a nation takes to the scene, then it re-defines its past in order to believe that it was not recently created, but that it always existed. That is essentially what the nationalist government of Skopje under former prime minister Gruevski did in recent years, in an aggressive and aesthetically grotesque way.

6. “What is the relationship between the Greek left and the Macedonian question?”

The connection between the left – and specifically the communist movement – and the Macedonian question is a difficult and crucial historical and political question. In public discourse, however, this connection is mainly related to the establishment of Greek anticommunism based on the notion that the close relationship (from the interwar period to the Greek Civil War) between Communist Party of Greece (KKE)⁵ and the Slavic-speaking Macedonian minority within Greek borders proves that KKE was traitorous and the Macedonian question was indeed created by the policies of the international communist movement (see above).



The relationship of the communist left with the Macedonian question is complex and starts with its position regarding minority populations in Greek Macedonia. This story goes back to the early 1920s, when the Comintern promoted the slogan of an “independent Macedonia and Thrace”, which was connected to the prospects of a social revolution in the region and the creation of a Balkan Communist Federation. This view was based on a fact

5. The Communist Party of Greece (KKE) was founded in 1918 as the Socialist Workers' Party of Greece. After joining the Comintern, it developed into a militant social force in the interwar years. During the country's Second World War occupation, Greek communists were instrumental in the creation of an influential national resistance movement. Contrary to the general rule of a peaceful postwar transition, Greece witnessed a lengthy and bloody civil war between 1944 and 1949 that ended with the defeat of the KKE.

(the multiethnic composition of the region, as historically this was before the population exchange) and a tradition of socialist thought regarding the creation of a Balkan socialist federation – which in turn reached the visions of Rigas Feraios and other revolutionaries of the 18th and 19th centuries. Although this position was abandoned after 1925, the Comintern remained faithful to its advocacy of minority populations. In that context, in 1934, the Balkan Secretariat of the Comintern recognised the existence of a Macedonian nation, while the KKE systematically made reference to the rights of the minority in Greece’s northern regions.

All this was and is important for the development of the KKE during the interwar period and, in particular, for the establishment of Greek anticommunism: From the early 1920s, the KKE was accused of being “antina-tional” because it made mention of the minority and mainly because – albeit reluctantly – it propagandised and expressed the slogan for an “independent Macedonia and Thrace” in official documents. The great complication, however, came later, in the 1940s. In 1943 a minority resistance group – the Slavomacedonian Popular Liberation Front (SNOF) – was founded in Florina and Kastoria. This organisation was connected to the National Liberation Front (EAM) and its guerrillas collaborated with its armed wing, the Greek People’s Liberation Army (ELAS). This relationship was not without its troubles, but it continued and established itself during the civil war, when NOF (the successor of the SNOF) guerrillas

fought on the side of the Democratic Army of Greece (DSA) and shared its fate in military defeat.⁶

The experience of the civil war was traumatic on many fronts for the region, specifically as regards the relationship of the Greek state with minority populations. The collaboration of the minority with the KKE established the belief of the state mechanism that the presence of the former was a constant danger for Greek territorial sovereignty. On this basis, as well as according to the military dogma that Greece was under threat from the communist north, the regions of northern Greece were placed under constant surveillance, while Slavic-speaking populations were dealt with as dangerous citizens and their basic rights were violated. The issue was not simply local. The charge that the KKE was seeking the “detachment of part of the whole territory”, namely, Macedonia, was a main element of Law 509/1947, the cornerstone legislation for persecutions during the civil war as well as of general Greek postwar anticommunism.

6. EAM was the national liberation movement that served as meeting point of communists, socialists and liberals during the Second World War. ELAS, its military wing, succeeded in creating zones of control that defied German and Italian rule. The SNOF was a regional organisation of Slavic-speaking Greek citizens in north-western Greece that joined EAM and ELAS, solidifying thus the connection between the minority and the Greek left. During the civil war, the KKE founded the Democratic Army of Greece (DSE), while the SNOF was renamed NOF.

At the same time, those who had crossed the border in retreat had to face complications arising from the conflict between the KKE and the Tito regime in Yugoslavia. In the same way that for the Greek state minority populations became a “nonexistent” (while at the same time being a very existent) problem, so, too, for the communist left did the guerrillas of the NOF – however, not the Slavic-speakers who fought alongside the DSE – suddenly become “nonexistent”. The KKE’s concern in deflecting the accusation of being “antinational” also contributed to this treatment.

In the face of all these separate threads, the activity of the minority in the 1940s turned into a collective taboo for Greek society. In an already charged landscape, the initiative of the Socialist Federation of Yugoslavia to name its southernmost entity the Socialist Republic of Macedonia complicated things even further. For the exiled KKE leadership and the left in general, the Macedonian question turned into a hidden wound: A point manipulated by anticommunist rhetoric to prove the “traitorous role” of EAM, ELAS, DSE, and the communist left collectively, while at the same time also being an indefensible heritage in the context of the falling out between the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia; an internally repressed and externally oppressed memory. When in 1982 the first Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) government allowed for the repatriation of political refugees of the civil war, “non-Greeks” were excluded; it is the only piece of legislation of the post-Junta period that

– even if only through exclusion – recognises the existence of “non-Greeks”, namely Slavomacedonians.⁷ The silence was momentarily broken by KKE leader Charilaos Florakis, who, briefly enjoying the all-party (coalition) government in the summer of 1989, found the opportunity to make mention of the “unacceptable and racist decision”, without, however, any follow-up on the matter.

And then, once again, silence. For Greece, the Socialist Republic of Macedonia led over time to the overall denial of a Macedonian identity domestically, while anyone who mentioned it was an enemy of the nation. Since then the country, following the example of a certain large stupid bird, has had its head in the sand: If it couldn't see the Macedonian nation, then it simply did not exist. But ostrich-like denial shouldn't surprise us; it should, however, concern us.-

This stance has had catastrophic consequences: It strengthens Macedonian nationalism and allows dangerous or ridiculous nationalists to present themselves as defenders of the nation in the face of a country – Greece – that is denying that nation's existence. At the same time, one is astounded by the persistence on the “nonex-

7. PASOK is a political party founded in 1974 after the downfall of the military dictatorship in Greece (1967–1974). Arguing for the socialist transformation of the country, it developed a militant rhetoric of national sovereignty and rose to power in 1981. Its early years in power were marked by legislative measures for the resolution of the traumatic legacies of the civil war. The right of repatriation for political refugees of the civil war was one of these measures.

istent”. If that were the case, what exactly are we discussing? Historians, politicians, analysts and Greek public opinion – have they all been tormented for so many years by something “nonexistent”? It seems far-fetched. It would seem that we must accept the following simple fact: It exists and it is there, regardless of Greek desires or phobias. Studying the heavy heritage of the Greek – mainly communist – left of the first half of the 20th century just reminds us of this in a rather loud voice. Even today when oblivion reigns – even in sections of the Greek left.

7. “Is there a Macedonian language?”

The overall denial of the Macedonian identity resulted in the partial dispute of every form of expression (cultural, lingual, ethnic) that included and includes the term Macedonian in any way. This matter has a unique aspect as it touches on one of the great taboos of Greek public discourse: The history of Slavic-speakers within Greek borders.



It is reasonable or, at least, it seems quasi-reasonable: If there is no Macedonian nation, then how can there be a Macedonian language? Right. So, what do most of the citizens in the country bordering with Greece speak? Do they communicate, perhaps, by miming at each other, mumbling ineffable verbs, or do they function in prelingual conditions? Here supporters of the “nonexistent nation” and the “nonexistent language” will put forth that this language is “an idiom”, “a collection of other languages” or “Bulgarian”. In this terrain, language is one of the major thorns in the side of the negotiations between the two countries. The syllogism is the following: If Greece recognises the Macedonian language, then the path is open to recognising the nation; and vice versa. And in order to steer clear of that point, the Greek side has for years denied the existence of the Macedonian nation and the Macedonian language, at the same time.

Our national sensitivity, or intolerance, to be more exact, in relation to the Macedonian language, is related

to the thorny matter of the minority within Greek borders. Historically, the Macedonian identity in Greece was one and the same with the language differentiation. Everyone understood, empirically and sensorially, that in northern Greece there were people who did not speak Greek; they spoke a different language. For that reason, Greek politics insisted so greatly on forbidding the language. In 2000, Tasos Kostopoulos published the monograph *The forbidden language*, a shocking account of the suppression of Slavic dialects in northern Greece. There was an exceptional attorney in the Greek town of Edessa at the time, who muttered to himself back then: “So many years of effort [to eradicate it] wasted. He brought everything out in the open.”

Eradicating the language was considered the best way to eradicate ethnic otherness, the “miasma”, as they called it until the early post-Junta period.

The fact that this language is still spoken to this day – and anyone with ears can hear it – should have deactivated this myth. If one crosses the border like thousands of Greeks do every year, what language do they hear in our neighbouring country?

The answer to that question has been provided by Greece itself. In 1977, in Athens, the Third United Nations Conference on the Standardisation of Geographical Names recognised, with no objections, the Macedonian language. And if that indicates to the minds of the suspicious some international conspiracy, they need only look at Greek censuses, which indicate that our

preconceived notions have minimal historical depth. As we said, in 1928 the Greek state itself recorded 82,000 citizens who spoke the “Slavomacedonian” language. In other censuses, such as an analysis by the National Intelligence Service on the state of the population in 1954, this population appears as “Slavic-speaking”. In any case, Greece ceased to include questions regarding spoken languages in censuses, precisely because it did not want any recognition of what everyone already knew: The existence of this “nonexistent” language. It is Macedonian, the *dopia* or *dopika* (“local”) as it is called in northern Greece (also) in order to avoid uttering the forbidden word. The last time the language question was asked was in the 1951 census.

At present the international linguistic community accepts the existence of a Macedonian language, incorporating it in the eastern south Slavic family. Linguists tell us that it is one thing what an uneducated farmer speaks, and another what the official language is. Both are obviously languages. But from the moment that (usually based on some local idioms and through vocabulary selection criteria, grammatical terms, etc.) a language is standardised and taught, that it becomes an “official standardised language”, through a political decision, it becomes a language. We said earlier that the speakers of what used to be the common Serbo-Croatian language engaged in a civil war. Since its end, both states – Croatia first and foremost, as it is trying to separate itself from anything Serbian – are trying to standardise their own

languages. They are achieving this slowly. The differences between Serbian and Croatian are growing ever deeper. And to think that it has only been 23 years since the end of the Yugoslav wars!

This process – which takes place in almost all official languages – was followed, mainly through standardisation and school teaching, in the framework of socialist Yugoslavia from 1945 onwards. One could contend that this process proves that the Macedonian language was a product of politics. No objection. Let us accept, for the sake of brevity in our discussion, that the political priorities of Yugoslavia determined the formation of a self-contained Macedonian language. As we have seen, however, it was not the first time that this had occurred, nor was it the last.

It is at around this point that our well-meaning interlocutor will counter with: Okay, it may be so, but it is *not* a language. It is an “idiom”, a “dialect”. These two words are especially widely used in Greece when it comes to our neighbour’s language. They are used in order to deny the existence of the language that was spoken and is spoken within and beyond Greek borders and to which we have referred to before. The use of these terms, however, is not neutral in value. It is anything but neutral. It is part of and fuels – intentionally or inadvertently – this exact inclination to deny or belittle the identity.

So, let us assume, for the sake of argument, that it is an idiom or a dialect of another language – Bulgarian in this particular case. What does that mean? That its

speakers have no language? Of course they do, since, no matter what we name it, it serves the functions that any other language or dialect or idiom would. Would we ever think that “Greek Cypriots have no language” because their language is a Greek dialect or idiom? When all is said and done, if this language is nonexistent, the Greek state would not have gone to such great pains to eradicate it in Greek Macedonia.

The difference of the terms above – language and dialect – according to the international community of linguists, is not so much lingual as it is political in texture. Would we ever think of saying that German and Dutch are just dialects? Probably not. However, the reason for which we use this perspective regarding the relationship of the Macedonian language with Bulgarian is political: We deny the language to deny the nation.

And here we arrive, once again, at the beginning of our concerns regarding the myths that focus on the “non-existent”: Whether the Macedonian language is a Bulgarian dialect, a south Slavic idiom or a self-contained language is of little importance, ultimately, to the matter at hand in this book. What is important is that it is spoken and that it is connected to a community of people who identify as Macedonians, and who, in fact, almost self-evidently, call their language Macedonian.

There cannot be a nonexistent language if there are people who speak it. If we accept what is a relatively simple axiom, then we can allow linguistic experts to carry out their research without distraction.

8. “Are we placing Greece on the same level as a statelet, the statelet of Skopje?”

The demeaning treatment of FYROM was a collateral expression of the confidence of Greek nationalism. The equation “statelet=FYROM” is one of those elements that reveals the unwillingness of Greek foreign policy and Greek society to confront the question of our neighbouring state’s name. It is a systemic collective repression mechanism.



The word “statelet” has permeated Greek public discourse since the early 1990s. It was the best way for one to avoid referring to the (unmentionable) neighbouring country by any name, mixed with a powerful dose of belittlement: So, “statelet” – and we’re done.

Through this mayhem and abuse, the word has lost its original meaning. It is useful, therefore, to remind ourselves of the basics: The term “statelet” in public international and constitutional law concern states that compose federations. There are federations that consist of states (such as the USA), of republics (such as Russia), cantons (Bosnia) and constituent states (Germany, Austria and India). The second use of the term concerns tiny states (microstates): In Europe those are Monaco, Liechtenstein, Andorra and San Marino. They are dots on maps. International law does not provide an exact definition for the specification of a statelet as far as its area or population is concerned: While there is an agreement

that a microstate is a tiny sovereign state, at times there have been objections as to whether the Vatican, with 842 residents and covering 44 hectares, is such, with regards to its ability to execute its overall sovereign competencies. And this is because microstates are sovereign and, from that aspect, equal to other states from an international law perspective.

Now, how is all that relevant to a country that covers 26,000 square kilometres and has a population of more than two million? The answer is simple: It is not relevant in the slightest. There are small states in Europe which we never once thought of calling “statelets”: Let us think of the Republic of Cyprus (9,250 square kilometres, 840,000 residents). Overall, in our neighbourhood of southeastern Europe, territories are not enormous in general, for historical reasons. Greece is no exception to this rule. Just think of our frustration should Turkey, with its 80 million citizens and 800,000 square kilometres, call Greece a “statelet”.

It is therefore obvious that the term statelet is used with regard to our neighbouring state as an indication of contempt for its statehood and, therefore, contempt for its identity. This notion was condensed by linguistics professor Georgios Babiniotis in his renowned dictionary. Reaching the zenith of tampering and scientific self-undermining, due to his commitment to the national rule, he presented the following definition for the entry “statelet”: “statelet (the) 1. state with small land area (and/or little organisational infrastructure): ~ of *Skopje*, ~

of the Vatican 2. each of the members of a federal state: it was one of the richest - of the Federal Republic of Germany."

In this case, "little organisational infrastructure" is linked to another connotation of "statelet": The geopolitically fragile character of the new state. From the first moment of the country's independence, this perspective seems to be waiting for its collapse. And that is where the word "statelet" has a meaning of its own: It insinuates the temporary, the fragile, the incomplete. It is true that there are serious problems of internal state cohesion in that country. However, they will continue to exist whether we call it a state or a statelet.

In 2001, it was on the brink of collapse due to an Albanian uprising in the west of the country. An Albanian community, which was seeking extended autonomy, traditionally resides on a stretch of land that extends along the entire region of its western borders with Albania and Kosovo. This status was instituted with the Ohrid Agreement of 2001, thanks to which civil war was avoided. Since then, the country has abandoned the constellation of unitarian states and has entered a status of bizonal statehood (like Belgium), which was deemed to be the only guarantee for the interests of the Albanian ethnic group. To this day, balances between the two ethnic groups are very fragile. The Greek position regarding the name of the country obviously intensifies this instability and seems like a self-fulfilling prophecy as regards the "nonviability of the statelet of Skopje".

The truth is that from the early 1990s there were

Greek politicians who were intensely opposed to the recognition of the neighbouring state, believing that it would, in any case, not be viable. Milošević's Serbia was an advocate of these beliefs, and, in fact, Milošević – with a nationalistic arrogance that led to folly – reached a point where he spoke of Greece and Serbia “dismembering the statelet”, so that the two “sister countries” could at last have common borders.

These voices have now gone quiet or are completely on the fringes, and it is common knowledge that any changes in the borders could only bring about more instability.

9. “Their constitution is irredentist.
Shouldn’t it be changed if we want
to reach a compromise?”

This was one of the more specific arguments and it had a special place in the recent negotiation between the two countries. Its starting point is the concern that the potential use of the term “Macedonia” could lead to border shifts and the strengthening irredentist trends. On those grounds, the Macedonian constitution was characterised as “irredentist” for years in order to highlight that a potential solution of the name issue would lead to unpredictable and unpleasant developments.



When compared to the previous questions, at least this one is anchored in the present. It refers to the present and not what is “historically just”. That alone makes it fair. However, it is astonishing that despite the question basking in public discourse in relation to the recent negotiations, very few people in Greece have gone to the trouble to tell us exactly what the Macedonian constitution says. That is how this feeling concerning an irredentist constitution looms over us, while we are denied any real data.

In order for us to know what it is we are searching for exactly, it is important to clarify the following: Irredentism (from the Italian term *irredentismo*) is an ideology that aims at liberating, “redeeming”, people of the same ethnic group who are outside the national home, the goal being to include them in the territories of the motherland. Irredentism is for one to say, “Constantinople

will be Greek once again one day”, envisioning border changes, changes that in contemporary history are usually the result of bloody military confrontations.

It is, however, crucial to separate nationalism from irredentism. While irredentism is always based on nationalism, it does not mean that nationalism always has irredentist tendencies. A German today may be a nationalist, without envisioning, for example, a change in the French–German border.

But let us deal with the matter at hand. Respected Greek constitutional and international law experts (Christos Rozakis, Giorgos Sotirelis or former deputy prime minister Evangelos Venizelos, who makes no secret of his opposition to the current government) have all found that there is no irredentism in the Macedonian constitution.

However, let us read the article in question (49) in the constitution:

The Republic cares for the status and rights of those persons belonging to the Macedonian people in neighbouring countries, as well as Macedonian expatriates ... and cares for the cultural, economic and social rights of the citizens of the Republic abroad.

It compares to other examples, such as article 108 of the Greek constitution, which envisages the following:

The State shall be concerned with those Greeks who live abroad and the maintenance of their links with the

Motherland. It shall also take measures for the education and the social and professional advancement of the Greeks who are employed abroad.

The additional reference in our neighbour's constitution to the "Macedonian people in neighbouring countries" is old-school nationalism; however, it is not an indication of irredentism. If that were the case, many countries in the modern world – with all the countries of central Europe, EU member states leading the pack – would have to be considered irredentist. But this is not the case.

Furthermore, in the case of this constitution there is one more critical parameter. In the 1990s the constitution changed after the relevant recommendation of the Badinter Committee (1992) and the signing of the Interim Accord with Greece (1995).⁸ Let us keep in mind that this was neither easy nor something to be taken for granted. Thus, the second amendment to the constitution of our neighbouring country clearly states: "*In the exercise of this concern the Republic will not interfere in the sovereign rights of other states or in their internal affairs.*" And it is made even clearer in article 6 of the Interim Accord,

8. The Badinter Arbitration Committee was the body set up by the Council of Ministers of the European Economic Community in 1991 to provide legal advice on 15 "major legal questions" relating to the transition from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia to the successor nation-states of the region.

where the neighbouring country “hereby solemnly declares that nothing in its Constitution, and in particular in the Preamble thereto or in Article 3 of the Constitution, can or should be interpreted as constituting or will ever constitute the basis of any claim ... to any territory not within its existing borders”.

Although it may be difficult for one to imagine a more decisive denouncement of irredentism in a constitutional text, the matter keeps reappearing in Greek public discourse. It is paradoxical that this turn of phrase permeates the entirety of the political spectrum: From the fixated repetition by the main opposition party and certain awkward governmental turns of phrase, to the KKE and certain organisations in the extra-parliamentary left. For a certain period, it was a regular turn of phrase in the speeches and statements of the Greek president.

Thus, the reference to “irredentism” functions as a necessary and preemptive antidote, so that we do not discuss the possibility of resolving an intrastate conflict that has occupied us for the last 25 years. And that’s not all. It functions as a refuge for those who would generally and abstractly like the issue to be resolved but, upon discovering the “irredentism of Skopje”, shake their head despondently and postpone the discussion to an undetermined point in the future. Naturally, this is the argument of and perfect alibi for those who just don’t want any resolution.

We should clarify something at this point. It is a given that there are major issues in public discourse and the

official Macedonian political vocabulary: From the schoolbooks that are bursting with nationalist references to the aesthetics of the former Gruevski government, with its statues in downtown Skopje – which, however, the present government, in a gesture of goodwill in the framework of the negotiations, has started to remove. However, this – let us repeat – cannot be translated into irredentist provisions in the country’s constitution.

The only specious – but truly extraordinary – argument as regards our neighbour’s constitutional irredentism, is that the reference alone to “Macedonia” constitutes in itself an expression that opens the doors to a future review of the borders. This is also the position of those who refuse any compromise between the two countries if the name of that country includes the term “Macedonia” or any derivative thereof.

If we assume, however, that the country, at some point in time, does indeed produce irredentist intentions, then its name will be of little importance. If it is called “North Macedonia”, it will look upon the south with an appetite, while “New Macedonia” will remember the old or ancient Macedonia and search for it. And neither would the name “Skopje”, assuming that it could be imposed, stop a state from investing in irredentism and looking in all directions on the horizon. To be honest, constitutions can change, while historically irredentism doesn’t always need constitutional provisions in order to unfold.

One might wonder: But is there no real basis in the

reference to “Skopje’s irredentism”, which is the focus of the Greek position? The answer is that there is a historical basis, however, that is nationally unspoken. It concerns, as we mentioned above, the existence of what is presently a small – and in the past a large – community of Slavic-speakers in Greece. What works Athens into a frenzy is that deep down it is scared, but it cannot admit what it is that truly scares it. Because, naturally, it is funny in rational terms to assume that Athens is insecure for any reason when facing a country so weak that it is attempting to become a member of international organisations – first and foremost – so that it may retain its unity.

So, Greece’s fixation on irredentism has no constitutional alibi in the 21st century. It does have historical depth, however, in the last century. We touched on it earlier. It was former Greek prime minister Konstantinos Mitsotakis himself who said in 1995: “What concerned me from the beginning was not the name of this state ... The issue was to not create a second minority problem in the Western Macedonia region.” From the end of the Balkan Wars and Greece’s annexation of the so-called “new territories” (Macedonia, Epirus, the northern and eastern Aegean islands, Crete), Greece tried in every way possible to incorporate Slavic-speakers. “In every way” meant by imposed assimilation: They had to pay a hefty price to become proper Greek citizens and cease to be mere “miasmas”. The policies of violent assimilation that were imposed on Greek Macedonia from the inter-war period to the end of the Cold War had results: By

then, there were far fewer Slavic-speakers, they were all bilingual and only a very small number did not have Greek national identity.

This is the population addressed by irredentist propaganda from nationalist circles in Skopje. And it is completely fair that propaganda such as this would bother Athens, as it doesn't want to hear about them anyway. But that is one thing, and it is a different thing for us to be searching for positions in the constitution of the neighbouring state that simply do not exist.

10. “So is it wrong to refer to that state as Skopje and its citizens as Skopjans?”

The substitution of the term “Macedonian” with the term “Skopjan”, the substitution of a country with the name of its capital, may be difficult to translate, but it is the point that sums up Greece’s refusal of its neighbour’s right to self-determination. The fact that this was a “national matter” (see question 1) in Greek public discourse made the use of the term Macedonian/Macedonia and its derivatives impossible in anything concerning the neighbouring state. Greek society became addicted to the use of the term Skopjan/Skopje, etc., in its place, with clearly belittling connotations for the neighbouring people.



“Accept the expression of our discrete standing,” concluded an appeal-letter in March of 1992 to world leaders, signed by distinguished Greeks such as Odysseas Elytis, Melina Mercouri, Helene Glykatzi-Ahrweiler, Dimitris Tsatsos and Aristovoulos Manesis. These people felt the need to assert the view that by using the name “Macedonia”, “the threat towards Greece became blatant and unavoidable”, and that “for us, our soul is our name”. That last phrase was recorded as a proud aphorism that was repeated countless times in Greek public discourse, as the letter gained enormous publicity within our borders (and almost none beyond them, but that is another story). The letter was written simply and spontaneously, and that is another reason why it resonated with Greeks, apart from the gravity of the signatures it bore. However, in 1999 when Manesis, the father of contemporary

Greek constitutional law, was asked in private if he realised that “our soul was our name” could be read as the moral legitimisation of the other side claiming the name “Macedonia” for themselves, he admitted, in the playful self-deprecating way he was known for by those he was familiar with, that “he had underestimated it”.

Since then, in northern Greece, near the border with the country in question, signposts have been standing for some years on main roads (including the Egnatia motorway), which say “Σκόπια” and, in Latin characters, “Skopia”. The term “Skopia”, however, does not exist in any language. This is truly a nonexistent term. The international name for the city in the Latin alphabet is, in fact, “Skopje”. “Skopia” is a Greek invention for the English transliteration of the word Greece uses for its northern neighbour. One wonders: Why did the word that already existed in English and was used for its capital not suffice?

The answer is, perhaps, that the “nonexistence” of the matter and the detrimental – to our neighbours – correlation in the relationship between us allows our country the arbitrary power of wordsmith, which has cemented itself in the consciousness of the Greeks. Its admittedly extreme version is “Skopia”: Not only do we name a country after its capital, but we do not even want to translate the name of the capital itself correctly with Latin characters.

Thus, gradually, the Macedonian question became the “Skopjan” issue somewhere along the way: The Mac-

edonian question being nonexistent. From the beginning, the citizens of a country whom, even if only informally, until 1990 we accepted as Slavomacedonians, became “Skopjans”, the country became “Skopje”, in English “Skopia”, and the life of Greece – in the name of this inconceivable patent – was ruled by the term and completely “Skopjenised”. Gradually, in recent years, some politicians and journalists have been struggling to resist the ease of Skopjenising their vocabulary, but things aren’t easy. “Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” is really long and, let’s not forget it, has the word “Macedonia” in there. And what are you supposed to call its citizens? FYROMians, former Yugoslavomacedonians? FYROM is practically unfamiliar to Greek speakers, although there were still some facetious references to “Fyromia” and “Fyromians”. This is how references to “our neighbouring country” or “our northern neighbour” flourished.

But what could justify such an arbitrary action? Nothing more and nothing less than the established belief regarding the “nonexistence” of identity. Since the matter is nonexistent, the use of words such as “counterfeiting” and “appropriation” are the only reasonable way out in order to explain that it is not at all nonexistent; it is very existent, indeed. But it must also remain “nonexistent”, so that all external events regarding the issue can also be considered false, starting with the name “Macedonia”, because that is exactly what cannot belong to them. At present we have reached a point at which our

fellow citizens cannot differentiate between “Skopje” and the official name of the state.

The reason, therefore, that dictates the “nonexistence” of the Macedonian question is not declaratory, but essentially regulatory: It does not tell us what exists, but rather what should (not) exist and what should (not) be recognised. This is what enables everyone in Greece to readily have an opinion and a name for our neighbours. A Greek MP and former extra-parliamentary minister, for example, proposed a short while ago that “they be called Dacia”, from the ancient Dacians or Gets; a taxi driver said, “they should call them ‘Republic of Skopje’”, the metropolitan bishop of Thessaloniki has supported the name “Vardaria” (from Vardarska), while a Greek MEP publicly wondered: “Why not Moesia?” We shall not go on, because we are certain that Greek readers have very often witnessed this unique type of name-bombing. A number of letters to newspapers, local and Athenian, since 1992, bear witness to the healthy spirit of competition of their editors, who also eagerly contributed to the search for a name. These imaginative texts are based on the notion that we Greeks have a natural historical right over the name of another state. The ease with which people, who are completely normal in all other respects, come up with a name for their neighbours originates exactly from the established belief that their name does not belong to them, but that they appropriated it from us.

And that legitimises our proposing of various names, with ease and without a care in the world, without even

going to the trouble to think if anyone asked us or if we would like it if someone did the same to us. Greek society has a long way to go in the future to cure this word-smith's fantasy regarding the names of others.

10 + 1. “So, is Greece not right?”



Greece is not right. A state cannot impose the name it sees fit on another. This fundamental position permeates the understanding of international law regarding intrastate relationships. The end of the Cold War marked the emergence of successor states of former socialist federations that numbered in the double digits. Can anyone imagine what would have happened if every neighbouring state could hinder the founding of a state entity based on matters that concerned its name? The European map would have been littered with armed conflicts, intrastate crises and disputed zones. Greece was unwilling to wrap its head around this realistic dimension in the early 1990s.

Gradually, however, this unwillingness softened. In practice, the initial position changed. The shift was illustrated by the Interim Accord, the lifting of the embargo, the acceptance of the name “Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”, and the willingness to compromise in the presently held position in an attempt to find common footing with the new government of our neighbour.

It has been 23 years of fruitless negotiations since the

Interim Accord. In the meantime, the word “Macedonia” is internationally identified with the republic of the same name. Greece pretends not to see the entries in dictionaries and encyclopaedias from around the world, at athletic events, at international meetings, in references in foreign newspapers, the 140 states – that’s 140, not 40 – that have recognised the Republic of Macedonia. It seems that no one apart from us was prepared to show any understanding for the arguments of Greek politics, as they were shaped in 1992.

One could naturally say that that alone does not suffice to indicate that the arguments in question are unfair. That is definitely the case. On the other hand, however, it does indicate *something*. Lastly, if one thought that all Greek positions are unjustly treated because the world at large is dismissive of them, then we would have to remind them that Greek positions regarding our neighbour to the east are understood throughout the world and that, despite the power of Turkey, they are in fact looked upon willingly and even sympathetically. On the contrary, only the European far right seems to support our country on the Macedonian front, on which Greece has experienced absolute diplomatic solitude from the very beginning.

We must also realise that the fact that, some 27 years later, international organisations and agencies are still leading the effort for an honest compromise between the two states regarding the name is not explained by their showing solidarity towards our national rights, but from the realistic recognition of Greece’s power. Namely, the

fact that we are at present still talking of a compromise – and that the recognition of the country’s name as “Republic of Macedonia” has not simply been internationally ratified, signed, sealed and delivered – is the product of Greece’s comparatively greater power and importance to the West. And this is justifiably a traumatic experience for our neighbours. This “realistic” stance of international agents does, however, have its limits.

With the Interim Accord of 1995, Greece undertook the obligation not to hinder the accession of FYROM, under its temporary name, to international organisations. However, in 2008 the Greek government decided to intensify its pressure by exercising the infamous Bucharest veto, which blocked FYROM’s accession to NATO under that name. In December 2011 the Greek positions only convinced one (the Greek judge) of the 16 judges of the International Court of Justice in the Hague, which ruled against Greece for violating article 11 of the Interim Accord. The court found that the provision of the document – that Greece not raise an objection to FYROM’s entry into international and regional organisations if it sought to join them under its temporary name (FYROM) – had a literal meaning. The meaning Greece ignored. The importance of this decision was naturally overshadowed in Greece by the triumphalism regarding the proud negotiation in Bucharest, which seemed to ignore how negative the ruling was against our country by a justice-disposing mechanism that shapes international law based on case law.

So, Greece is wrong. And, even when it does not believe it is wrong, it is not doing itself justice with the arguments and practices it uses. Let us remember the cries at the rallies of 1992 about “Greek–Serbian borders” that envisioned the dismemberment of a small and poor country that had just been founded. And if we can at last, thankfully, disregard these voices as extreme, outdated or even weird, what can we say about the decision of the Greek government to impose an embargo in order to blackmail our neighbours? And even if we accept, mainly for the sake of brevity, that this was a justified reaction – for the era – how can we insist that Greece is in danger of aggression from its neighbour, when one country has an annual military expense budget of €4 billion and the other of just \$115 million? By insisting that we are right, we establish the delusion to which we have condemned ourselves, while, on the other hand, we strengthen the wounded nationalism of the other side.

In this unpleasant landscape one can discern some hope. If in 1992 the feeling that Greece was absolutely right was dominant, things have now changed. Today it is impossible to imagine schools closing by order of the education minister and the students being bussed while waving Greek flags, restaurateurs buying paper napkins with the Vergina Sun on them and the slogan “Macedonia is Greek” appearing on official state documents.

Back then the nonresolution of the Macedonian question permeated the entire political spectrum and constituted the main core of our foreign policy. That is no longer the case.

Why did all this happen and what can be done about it today?



Above, we have tried to show that the Greek position on the Macedonian question is not just unreasonable but that it has historical roots and is based on fears that reach back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These roots were expressed with distorted passion in the late 20th century and are less so in the early 21st century. We are not in a void. On the contrary; every political behaviour means *something*. This meaning was, at different times, framed by a contemporary political context. In the early 20th century, in the era of ethnic groups, the Greek state treated the Macedonian identity either as something that could be assimilated or, if that didn't happen, eliminated. This position was intensified during Greece's adventures in the 20th century: Concern about the Macedonian identity mixed with the realities of the civil war, and then the Greek authorities tried everything they could to complete the project of violent assimilation or, simply, "nonexistence".

However, history is unpredictable. When it seemed

that there was no longer anything that could drastically change the dominant Greek narrative regarding the non-existence of a Macedonian identity, our neighbouring Yugoslavia broke up, while the Socialist Republic of Macedonia sought and obtained its independence as the “Republic of Macedonia”. The die was cast! Greek policy towards the new country was dictated by the agendas, phobias and prejudices of the past, mixed with a huge amount of capital to be used in domestic politics between the parties in power at the time.

The country had grown accustomed to the “nonexistent”, and thus, after 1991, it was terribly distressed by the idea of compromising with the “existent”. At that point, at the rallies and the public aphorisms, nationalistic frenzy passionately embraced national folly. Of course, it was not the first time this had happened in Greek history. The result was what we described above: A people addicted to nostalgic narratives, invented traditions and selected memories that consume it, hatching inside it the far-right virus of being nationally-minded – and at difficult junctures, such as those of the present.

In conclusion, here we find a strong counterargument: When all is said and done, up to a point, it is not that damaging to become (well) accustomed to lies. Many are quick to say that a political society always needs its myths and they will wag their finger at us saying: “Do not bother us with your interpretations and, before all else, pay attention to the nationalism of the others.”

However, this is a cynical notion that shifts the focus

of this discussion: “It is not important what happened, but what we learn happened.” This cynicism is also distinguished by an unbearable paternalism. According to it, when all is said and done, it is better for citizens to be immature and clueless – accusing humanity of being ignorant of history while they are the ones who are ignorant – than to be insecure and constantly in fear of learning that which they must not. However, this argument undermines itself, because it breeds exactly that which it seems to denounce: Our neighbour’s nationalism. Lastly, it is also deeply authoritarian, as it contributes in its way to the reproduction of a social class based on ignorance, prejudice and fear. The notion that *we must learn the truth only when it doesn't hurt* is extremely problematic for individual or collective self-knowledge, while in general it is an obstacle for the progress of human thought. It is the other side of the argument that – implicitly or explicitly – permeates our brand new national-mindedness: “We are right because we are Greek.”

Although the paternalistic cynicism of national-mindedness (we allow people to live in their myths) causes revulsion, it could just about be used as an argument in the name of the gain (if any) it brings for social peace among people: The argument that it would have some functional value if indeed humanity believed that the “Greeks are right because they are Greeks”.

Naturally, this is the stuff of fancy. Furthermore, a similar argument resides in our neighbouring country and it fed off ours: “We are right because we are Macedo-

nians”; the nationalistic frenzy that largely characterised the Gruevski government period, despite efforts to rein it in by the previous Gligorov leadership and the current leadership of the state. The return to normality under the current Zaef government provides a unique opportunity for the countries to turn over a new leaf and deal with their many real problems, while also confronting their national myths.

This challenge will be a positive result for their relationships and, most importantly, for their democracies. Otherwise, there is a troubling totalitarianism lying in wait that is already permeating political culture: “We will not go to the trouble of confronting that which we already know, because, very simply, we know that the power is not in arguments; it is in silence and oblivion.”

We experienced this largely in Greece in 1992 with the Macedonian question. But we are gradually ridding ourselves of it. Slowly and torturously, some might say. Perhaps. But the times, they are a-changing. This gives cause for some hope.

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