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Macedonia: a secular conflict area

Abstract:

Macedonia, a small country located in the heart of the Balkans, has a capital importance in allowing the flow of people and resources to and from Europe, given the difficult terrain in the area.

This old reality has had great influence in the development of a rich and complex history that is marked by wars over the control of the territory –for the larger area known as Macedonia region in which this nation is included-. They are so intense that in the nineteenth century the term “Macedonian question” was created as a way to define an array of almost-permanent disputes.

A brief review of the dynamics of this land, culminating in the birth of today’s Macedonia, and formulating a question in the framework of the final conclusions, structure the present analysis.

Keywords:

Macedonia, internal disputes, external disputes, communication routes, key terrain, Powers, Empires, “Macedonian question”, Balkans.

Introduction

Even though Macedonia avoided the war clouds that hit the territory of the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s and led to both the extinction of the so-called “Yugoslav experiment”, which was fortunate for some and a failure for others,¹ and to the creation of independent states that were former federated republics; it cannot be concluded that its territory has not been subjected to numerous tensions and conflicts, for both endogenous and exogenous issues.

The small country, roughly the size of the Autonomous Community of Valencia and with a population exceeding two million, went through a time period when it appeared only sporadically in the media to inform about conflicts and confrontations. Recently however, Macedonia has once again been in the news: led by students, the riots and demonstrations against the government (accused of corruption) are gradually giving way, as 2015 advances, to a widespread unrest in an environment of political and social divisiveness.² A priori, this does not seem to come under an interethnic struggle context, always a delicate issue in a country full of minorities, some of which, like the Albanians, make up just over a quarter of the population.

On May, an armed attack on a police station in Kumanovo by an alleged Albanian terrorist group from Kosovo,³ triggered all the alarms of new possible interethnic incidents, and riots and pressure against the government occurred around the country. This happened in a regional environment influenced by: the complicated political and economic climate in Greece (a country with which it has borders and its differences),⁴ the economic sanctions imposed by the European Union on Russia (the big Slavic brother) as a result of the Ukrainian conflict,⁵ as well as the Russian aspiration to build new gas pipelines to carry its hydrocarbons bypassing countries and areas without affinity with Moscow.⁶

To make matters worse, during the month of August, the flood of Syrian refugees

¹ Bogdan Denitch, *Nacionalismo y Etnicidad. La Trágica Muerte de Yugoslavia*, Siglo XXI editores, Madrid, 1995.

² As an example, La Vanguardia, *Heridas 29 personas en disturbios entre policías y manifestantes en Macedonia*, May 06, 2015. Available at: <http://www.lavanguardia.com/internacional/20150506/54430453728/heridas-29-personas-en-disturbios-entre-policia-y-manifestantes-en-macedonia.html>. (All the websites are valid and active on September 20, 2015).

³ El País, *Choques armados dejan una veintena de muertos en Macedonia*, May 11, 2015. Available at http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2015/05/10/actualidad/1431274032_590140.html

⁴ La Vanguardia, *Una Grecia dividida decide sobre su futuro y sobre Europa*, July 5, 2015. Available at <http://www.lavanguardia.com/economia/20150705/54433217085/grecia-dividida-gobierno-europa.html>

⁵ El País, *La UE renueva otros seis meses las sanciones a Rusia*, June 22, 2015. Available at http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2015/06/22/actualidad/1434967078_635262.html

⁶ El País, *Rusia y Grecia firman un pacto para prolongar el gasoducto desde Turquía*, June 19, 2015. Available at http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2015/06/19/actualidad/1434709247_831736.html

fleeing their country's conflict (which in turn has produced an unprecedented crisis in Europe), must broadly go across Macedonia.⁷ Even though it has a small size, a mountainous terrain, and it is landlocked, the country still constitutes a crucial Balkan land border crossing point, and therefore, a mandatory south entrance to Europe.

Macedonia appears again as a potential unsettling scene, as a reminder of its own reality and history. This paper presents a brief analysis of the Macedonian complexity, from its early ages until its emergence in the international arena as an independent nation, and will take into consideration the breakup of Yugoslavia. It leaves for a further analysis, on the basis of recent events which are partially presented in this introduction, the arguable assessment of whether Macedonia may be, once again, as we have seen so many times before, in the eye of the storm.

The strength of geography

Nowadays, especially in the Western world, which is highly technological and where engineering manages to face more and more arduous challenges every day, we tend to underestimate the impact of geography, the relief and climate, on the future of society.⁸ In Macedonia's case, such issues are essential due to its key location in the Balkan peninsula.

Due to its relative position in the globe, this peninsula (with its northern boundary argued to be formed either by the Trieste-Odessa line or by the Danube, Sava and Kupa rivers, as shown in the annexed computer graphics) constitutes not only the



Península balcánica

Fuente: Wikipedia y elaboración propia

natural overland route between Europe and the East, but also the natural access to the Mediterranean Sea in the central European plain, Eastern Europe and even the relatively near Russian steppe. Therefore, dominance over the Balkan peninsula guarantees the control of overland routes to the Middle East and the Black Sea, as well as the access to the Mediterranean Sea for Central and Eastern Europe. Consequently, empires, peoples and nations have aspired to dominate this geostrategic position over centuries.

⁷ El Mundo, *Miles de refugiados sirios cruzan Macedonia hacia Serbia y rumbo a Europa occidental*, August 23, 2015. Available at <http://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2015/08/23/55da0d8522601d165b8b4583.html>

⁸ It is very interesting in this respect Robert Kaplan's reading, *La venganza de la geografía: como los mapas condicionan el destino de las naciones*, RBA Ensayo, Barcelona, 2014.

Once inside the peninsula, the rugged relief influences and decreases transit corridors: the great natural routes through which cultures, goods, peoples and conflict, have flowed for thousands of years. Many of these conflicts aim for the control of these few communications routes,⁹ and their value increases due, precisely, to their scarcity. These routes generally tend to flow through valleys, parallel to the main rivers, and in a slight radial way. They converge towards the main cities, which are located and developed precisely on the great communications routes. Without communications there is no development.

It is with good reason that most of the capitals of the republics of the former Yugoslavia such as Ljubijana (Slovenia), Zagreb (Croatia), Belgrade (Serbia) and Skopje (Macedonia); are found in the great axis that creates the north to south area (the area conformed by the Danube and Vardar rivers). This axis ends in the Aegean Sea, in the Greek city of Thessaloniki, a millenary sea port of crucial importance for the entire Balkan and Central European region.

The scarcity of natural routes, added to the fact that they are mostly parallel to the sea, brings an extraordinary value to those that, transversally to the landlocked ones, head to the coast, and connect the Danubian Plain with the sea. Being extremely scarce, two routes basically stand out. The first one is the Sarajevo-Mostar corridor (part of which shapes the Neretva river¹⁰), on which the capital of Bosnia Herzegovina (the Sarajevo that largely suffered during the Bosnian war) is built. The second one (with a much smaller capacity runs through Montenegro encompassing its capital, Podgorica –a further example of this reality.

With regard to the east coast of the peninsula, flanked by the Adriatic Sea, it is important to highlight what constitutes the natural access to the sea of the Central European plain: the city of Trieste, a millenarian port disputed since the Roman age. In a recent past, there have been serious conflicts over the territory between Italy and Tito's Yugoslavia, and it has nowadays generated disputes over the legal status and

⁹ As a sign of the interest that these matters have always awaken on analysts, and also of the quality of the work written on the matter, which was done in the former Escuela Superior de Guerra, now called the Escuela de Guerra del Ejército en Madrid, we can mention the following: an analysis of the main steps of the area can be found in José Gálvez, *Estudio Político-Geográfico de los países Balcánicos: Sus Problemas y Teatros de Guerra*, 1926, Escuela Superior de Guerra, Madrid 1926; and a description of the transit corridors and the strife during the nineteenth century embodied by the powers to gain control of the transit corridors through the creation of railways (especially the Dutch Viena-Salonic rail project) can be found in Joaquín Raventos, *El Problema de los Balcanes*, Escuela Superior de Guerra, Madrid 1925, páginas 15-17.

¹⁰ The Neretva river connects Central Bosnia and the Adriatic, through Croatia on its final stretch; the city of Movstar is found on its river course, and the fights and battles for the control of this corridor and this city have been common throughout history (the last one occurred during the UNPROFOR mandate of 1993, with the Spanish blue helmets displayed in the area, and suffering several casualties in the cited mission). A heated account of the deeds and actions in which the Spanish forces participated can be read at Javier Arribas, *Casco Azul, Soldado Español, Una Misión Humanitaria en el Infierno de Bosnia*, *Temas de Hoy*, Madrid, 1994.

distribution of the waters of its gulf between Slovenia and Croatia.¹¹ Also, there is even a certain eagerness by the city to proclaim itself as an independent state.¹²

To obtain (or prevent an enemy from obtaining) access to the sea, constitutes one of the most intense and constant geopolitical reasons to trigger armed conflicts. The permanent strife between the Russian and the Ottoman Empires during the 19th century must be understood in this context, as well as later, the birth of Albania in 1913 to close the access to the sea of Serbia (an action which was carried out again recently after Montenegro's independence in 2006). This was a sort of recreation of what would come to be called “the Great Game”, the struggle held by the first naval power of the time, Great Britain,¹³ which wanted to keep Russia far from the sea at all costs. It tried to accomplish it, through the creation of buffer states (such as Afghanistan or the already mentioned Albania), alliances, by providing or removing its support to the Ottoman Empire depending on the circumstances, or by using local forces and movements.

Since the disintegration of Yugoslavia, a country with little access to the sea, the situation of its former republics, has, in this sense, been dissimilar. It has finally resulted in Macedonia and Serbia being landlocked states without access to the sea, and Bosnia simply having a small area at Neum.¹⁴

Greece, Turkey and Bulgaria, are the countries in control of the Aegean Sea and the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits, which are crucial transit points to access the Mediterranean Sea from the Black Sea. It is an area of vital importance, both then and increasingly now, because of: not only the need for a strong maritime traffic through this congested area,¹⁵ but also the rising flow of both hydrocarbons (whether by ship or pipeline) from the Caspian and the East, and goods coming from Asia.

Therefore, if the high-capacity accesses from the sea are scarce, if the Balkans constitute the gateway of southern Europe and the closest to the Middle East, and if the European demand for hydrocarbons -along with other types of products- is

¹¹ Glenda Sluga, *The Problem of Trieste and the Italo-Yugoslav border*, State University of the New York Press, 2001; ABC.es, *Croacia y Eslovenia Resucitan Viejas Rencillas en el Golfo de Trieste*, March 14, 2009. Available at <http://www.abc.es/20090314/internacional-europa/croacia-eslovenia-resucitan-viejas-20090314.html>.

¹² BBC, *Trieste, la ciudad italiana que quiere ser un país independiente*, November 02, 2014. Available at http://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2014/11/141031_internacional_triESTE_independiente_italia_bd

¹³ For more information, look at Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game: the struggle for Empire in Central Asia*, Kodanska América, New York, 1994.

¹⁴ Croatia's attempt to build a bridge called the Peljesac bridge, to bypass the bay of Peljesar where the only Bosnian seaport (Neum) is located, and thus provide a physical continuity to its coastline. It has been a subject of controversies between Bosnia and Croatia, and although it has not gotten beyond the initial phases of the project, there seems to be a new attempt to finish its construction. BBC news, *Croatia: Delayed bridge bypassing Bosnia goes ahead*, July 15, 2015. Available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-news-from-elsewhere-33541099>

¹⁵ One only has to look at the maritime traffic information provided at the *Bosphorus Strait News website*, <http://www.bosphorusstrait.com/>

intended to be covered, to a larger extent, through this area;¹⁶ the countries of the peninsula acquire, as it happened before, a powerful role and influence as transit countries, to guarantee the flow of current goods and resources, which, to a greater extent, will have to be channelled through the scarce existing land routes.

And Macedonia is the gateway from the south, from Greece to Europe.

Macedonia, gateway to the Balkans

The name of Macedonia is very old, and the region to which this terminology refers, can be extended, depending on the historical period taken into account, far beyond the borders of the current "Macedonia." This is one of the reasons for the dispute over the name of the region, which has triggered its recognition as "Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM)," in many international forums.

Currently, the country called Macedonia (ARYM) is essentially articulated around the Vardar river, which goes through the country from north to south. The rugged relief of the country, which is dotted with mountain ranges, converges on the valley of the river an authentic axis that structures, to a large extent: cities, communications and the life of Macedonia.



Mapa físico de Macedonia

Fuente: <http://www.worldofmaps.net>

This is the natural route south of the Balkans, the road from Greece and Turkey to reach the heart of the Balkan area. It is the access to Europe, primarily the route (shown in the attached image with an arrow towards Pristina, the capital of Kosovo) that shapes the great Vardar-Danube axis, which constitutes the core of the Pan-European Corridor X.¹⁷ This corridor was recently (in 1999) crossed by NATO troops on their way to Kosovo, and on the past, witnessed the march of Ottoman troops towards Europe. Next to it

and also in Macedonia, there is another entrance towards the centre of Europe: the

¹⁶ María del Mar Hidalgo García, *El Turkish Stream como alternativa al tránsito de gas por Ucrania*, Documento de Análisis 23/2015 April 22, 2015, Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos. Available at http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2015/DIEEEA23-2015_Turkish-Stream_MMHG.pdf

¹⁷ European Commission, *Mobility and Transport*. Disponible en http://ec.europa.eu/transport/themes/infrastructure/index_en.htm

one indicated on the attached image with the reference “Valle Preservo”¹⁸ area located south of Serbia, and with a northward projection, within the same great axis.

In view of this secular arrangement as a transit zone, the ethnic configuration of present-day Macedonia is huge (as it happened before in all the region). Empires, migrations, forced displacements and ethnic cleansing (which have also occurred in most of the Balkan countries), have created a population which currently, based on the last census conducted in the country in 2002,¹⁹ shows: an ethnic Slavic majority (more than 64%) identified as Macedonian, a minority of Albanians who add up to 25% of the population, and significant groups such as Turks (3,9%), Roma people (2,7%), and Serbs (1,8%), along other ethnic minorities.

The control of these questions (power, nation, ethnicity, group, etc.) which resemble each other greatly in certain aspects, guarantees access not only to the Balkans but also to one of the main gateways to Europe from the south (or inversely, from Central Europe to the south). This results in a source of dispute between regional and global powers to trigger conflicts and wars. In addition, the Macedonian population configuration (which is however not distributed homogeneously throughout the country), allowed and may even allow nowadays, the reliance by foreign powers on similar groups, in terms of ethnicity, culture and religion, to achieve their goals.

The importance of this territory and the transcendence of its control by foreign parties is so significant that, in the past, the term “Macedonian question” was created.

The “Macedonian question”

Although this designation is used in different ways, both from a temporal and a causal point of view (Berlin Congress of 1878, Balkan Wars 1912-1913, dispute over the name and national symbols, etc.), which in turn is a clear reflection of the complexity of “the question,” this so-called “Macedonian question” can be narrowed down, without being exclusive, to the disputes between Greece,²⁰ Bulgaria and

¹⁸ The other arrow in the infographics which says “valle del Preservo,” constitutes a second route within the framework of this great axis of communication. The mentioned valley, as it happens with Kosovo (which is located in Serbia and is sometimes referred to as “East Kosovo”), has an Albanian majority of population. The independence of Kosovo, which several nations such as Spain have not recognized, and the disturbances occurred during the start of this new century in the Preservo valley, are directly related to the attempt to control of these accesses as a means of power and survival (through the spread of traffic through the axis) of Albanian “irredentism.” Pedro Sánchez Herráez, *Kosovo. ¿El camino hacia...? (Parte II)*, Documento de Análisis 22/2015, April 21, 2015. Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos. Available at http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2015/DIEEEA22-2015_Kosovo-Camino_hacia_Partell_PSH.pdf

¹⁹ Republic of Macedonia, State Statistical Office, *Population Census*. Available at http://www.stat.gov.mk/OblastOpsto_en.aspx?id=31

²⁰ Greece, a nation of glorious past, and essential in shaping the Western worldview, celebrates its independence on March 25, commemorating the “freedom or death” call (“call” still is the national

Serbia, the regional Balkan powers, for the dominance of this key territory.²¹ The territory comprised either the entire Macedonian region or a significant part of it, and was supported by the global powers of the moment (Russian, Austro-Hungarian and British Empires), in a permanent struggle both with the Ottoman Empire and between them during the 19th and 20th century.

The powers' dispute, Proxy Wars

European nations, some such as Germany and Italy (which were newly arrived to the international scene, were considered absolutely “emerging” in terms of current terminology, and were looking for their “place in the sun”), competed across the world in the midst of an economic, political, social and military expansion phase.²²

Russia, using a Pan-Slavist policy and the myth of a third Rome,²³ continued to try to find access to warm Mediterranean seas, and its eagerness increased after its defeat against Japan in 1905.²⁴ Great Britain tried to avoid it, while Austria-Hungary looked for access to the sea and Asia through the south (the “Orient Express” railway clearly illustrated its eagerness). All of them avoided confronting each other directly, and therefore used their Balkan allies as a tool to reach their purposes: in the current terminology, these are proxy wars. However, occasionally, the powers were dragged into wars which were initiated by the disputes of their “delegates” (being the most obvious case World War I), on what came to be known as the “Balkan trap”.²⁵ All this happened under the reality of an Ottoman Empire occupying the territory under

motto) with which the “War of Independence” against the Ottoman Empire started. This conflict started on 1821 and ended ten years later.

²¹ We must recall again that the reference for this dispute relates to the “Macedonian region,” whose territories (depending on different times and sources). Without clear defined geographical borders, could reach the Aegean Sea. As a simple illustration, look up the maps in the following website: <http://www.historyofmacedonia.org/ConciseMacedonia/map.html>

²² Look up the fights between powers at: Misha Glenny, *The Balkans: Nationalism, War and the Great Powers. 1804-1999*, Penguin Books, Nueva York, 2000; Mark Mazower, *The Balkan: A Short History*, Modern Library Chronicle, Nueva York, 2002, capítulo 3 “Eastern Question”, página 77-113; Pedro Sánchez Herráez y Juan Manuel Rodríguez Barrigón, *El Conflicto del Líbano*, Ministerio de Defensa, Madrid, 2009, páginas 31-38.

²³ Providing a messianic and leadership vision of Christianity against the Ottomans, and as the monk Filoteo pointed out to Basil III in 1511, “the first and second Rome have come to an end, the third Rome is growing gloriously, but there will never be a fourth Rome [...]”. In this regard, it is very interesting to read the work of Antonio Antelo, *Notas sobre “Moscú, Tercera Roma”*. *Génesis y evolución de una teología política*, Revista Espacio, Tiempo y Forma. Serie III Historia Medieval, nº 5, 1992, páginas 441-450; así mismo, William Pfaff, *La Ira de las Naciones: la civilización y las furias del nacionalismo*, Andrés Bello, Santiago de Chile, 1994 y la obra Olga Novikova, *La Tercera Roma. Antología del Pensamiento Ruso de los siglos XI a XVI*, Tecnos, Madrid, 2000.

²⁴ The impact of the events about distant territories taking place in a place of the world, allows us to determine a set of similarities with the current situation, where, being absorbed in the concept of “globalization” as something absolutely new, we tend to evade situations, problems and solutions, which have already occurred previously.

²⁵ In this regard, Francisco Veiga, *La Trampa Balcánica*, Random House Mondadori, Barcelona, 2002,

consideration, but in utter decline and being contemptuously called “the weak old man,” even though it did not retreat without fighting.

Therefore, after the Russian imposition of the Treaty of San Stefano on the Ottoman Empire on March 03, 1878, due to the defeat of the Ottomans in the last Russo-Turkish war of 1877-1878, the new reordering and reallocation of territories derived from it (which for example led to the emergence of what would be known as the Great Bulgaria²⁶), led to the other European powers’ extreme concern. This in turn asked for a European conference that kept a certain status quo and prevented a global conflagration. On July 13 1878, the Berlin Congress took place,²⁷ under the chairmanship of the German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, in which the Balkans were reorganized again and the interests of England, Russia and Austria-Hungary in the area were balanced. However, it was not possible to fulfil all the aspirations of the powers, the new nations, and the territories that were still under Ottoman power.²⁸

The Bulgarians were anxious to obtain Macedonia to gain access to the Aegean Sea. Serbia had the same intention paying specific attention to Thessaloniki, and the Greeks tried to take its border as far north as possible. Ethnic, historical, religious and other similar arguments were all used by the parties. Simultaneously, we must not forget that this all happened in the 19th century, the century of nationalisms, and we must therefore add to this dispute, an emerging “Macedonian nationalism” that created a new source of conflict in this sufficiently-enough condemned region.

The centrifugal and centripetal forces collided in Macedonia coming from the north, south, east and from within, in a continuous conflict of interests that resulted in ongoing armed confrontations, population movements and changes of borders. Furthermore, Macedonia not only was the centre of regional disputes, but also the object of desire of the powers, which intervened either directly or by delegation, or rather threatened to do so in the area.

The eagerness to expel the Turk from Europe grew as the century advanced, and it was inevitably related to the contention to see who took control of the straits. After the Ilinden uprising of 1903,²⁹ a Macedonian nationalist uprising against the Ottoman Empire (which was harshly crushed), between 1904 and 1908 the so-called “Fight for Macedonia” was fought. Greek and Bulgarian volunteers fought in this historic region against the Ottomans in a conflict riddled with slaughters and massacres on both

²⁶ Great Bulgaria stretched from the Black Sea to the Aegean, which could provide a clear dominant position over Russia. In fact, the 3rd of March, 1878, currently is the national day of Bulgaria. The Treaty text is available at <http://pages.uoregon.edu/kimball/1878mr17.SanStef.trt.htm>.

²⁷ The partial Treaty text can be found on <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1878berlin.html>.

²⁸ In this sense it is enough to read the letter sent by Bishop Sava to “the respected gentlemen who represent the powers in the Berlin Congress,” entitled “The Turks massacre us and the Albanians burn our homes,” available at <http://www.serbianunity.net/culture/history/berlin78/index.html#lettbishsava>.

²⁹ A brief note about it can be found at: ABC definición *Levantamiento Ilinden-Preobrazhenie*, <http://clicksdefinicions.com/letra-l/levantamiento-ilinden-preobrazhenie.php>

sides. And after the Italo-Turkish war of 1911-1912, Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece and Montenegro, forming what would come to be known as the “Balkan League,” attacked in a non-coordinated way (since it could almost be described as independent campaigns) the last remnants of the Ottoman Empire in Europe, starting the so-called “Balkan Wars.”

The Balkan wars. New fight for Macedonia.

The first Balkan war (October 1912-May 1913) was characterized by an unprecedented brutality,³⁰ and provided fast victories for the allies: Serbian forces occupied most of Albania, while the Bulgarians advanced on Constantinople. At that moment, the great powers took matter into their own hands, for they did not want to have a new rival (the already mentioned Balkan League) that could conquer what they considered to be areas of their own interest and influence. Austria would not allow the Serbs to keep Albania, and Russia opposed the Bulgarian ambitions on Thrace (in a general sense, part of the “historic Macedonia”).

Serbia's successful attempt to obtain access to the sea, after reaching the Adriatic in Durres (Albania), would be neutralised after the war threats of Austria-Hungary and its subsequent concentration of 200,000 troops to force the retreat.³¹

After the end of hostilities, the Treaty of London,³² signed the 30th May 1913, aimed to end the conflict. However, the internal disputes of the Balkan nations over their recent conquests, especially in Macedonia's case (since the creation of an independent Albania, supported by Italy and Austria-Hungary, definitively obstructed Serbia's access to the Adriatic and its attempts to divide the coastal territory between the Balkan powers³³), led to the resumption of hostilities in June of that same year.

In what would be called the Second Balkan War (June-July 1913), Bulgaria faced its former allies, and Turkey took advantage of the situation to counterattack. As a result, in a few weeks, Bulgaria (the great winner of the first Balkan War), was stripped of almost all its recent conquests, and the Ottoman Empire managed to

³⁰ Misha Glenny, *The Balkans: Nationalism, War and the Great Powers. 1804-1999*, Penguin Books, Nueva York, 2001, pg 246.

³¹ The Serbian eagerness to obtain an access to the sea can be seen in the present declaration made by the head of the “Albanian Contingent,” the Serbian military column that soaked through the mountains of Albania into the sea during the First Balkan War: “This is our unstoppable aspiration. It is the reason for our waging of this war... to create a path between our homeland and the whole world.” Dubravka Stojanovic, *Construction of Historical Consciousness: The Case of Serbian History Textbooks*, at María Todorova, *Balkan Identities: Nation and Memory*, C. Hurst&Co., London 2004, pg 332.

³² The terms of the Treaty are available on <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/boshtml/bos145.htm>.

³³ Great Britain. Naval Intelligence Division, *Geographical Handbook Series: Jugoslavia*, Volume II, 1944, pg 114.

regain a small part of the territory lost in Thrace, thus ensuring its weak but still existing presence in the European Continent. In August of that same year the Treaty of Bucharest was signed,³⁴ which ended the Second Balkan War and confirmed Albania as an independent nation, apparently closing this channel to the sea and “blocking a flank.” This consequently led to the increase of pressure on Macedonia.

These wars, in a European tensed environment, were followed with a lot of interest, as evidenced by the abundant literature that they generated shortly after their conclusion.³⁵ They were not only followed by the powers, but also by all of those willing to resort to arms to attain political objectives. As a matter of fact, Leo Trotsky, the future Soviet revolutionary who participated in these wars as a reporter, reinforced his belief that a well-armed, trained, and guided revolutionary army, could aspire to defeat a government army.³⁶

Also, in addition to their own definition as “national liberation wars,” the fact that they were initially directed at the Ottoman Empire (the highest Muslim power of the time), helped to reinforce the identification of nation and religion,³⁷ whose repercussions in the Balkans and Macedonia still persist today.

Moreover, one of the consequences of the Balkan Wars was that, in their aftermath, a Bulgarian-Serbian union was impossible to make. This union would probably have allowed a much greater Balkan unity, preventing the costs of constant disputes between both, and would probably have dissuaded Austria-Hungary from taking the steps that led up to World War I. One of the causes that prevented this union was the aspirations for Macedonia over the central arrangement of the Balkans.³⁸

³⁴ Text of the Treaty available at <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/boshtml/bos149.htm>

³⁵ Among which we can highlight Pierre L. Palat, *Guerres des Balkans 1912-1913*, Lavauzelle, París 1915; Alain de Penennrun, *La Guerra des Balkans en 1912*, Editions Militaires, París 1914; José Brissa, *La Guerra en los Balkanes 1912-1913*, Maucci S.F., Barcelona 1915; MINISTERIO DE LA GUERRA, *Bosquejo Campaña Turco-Balcánica de 1912-1913*, Talleres del Ejército, Madrid, 1913; Immanuel, *La Guerre des Balkanes de 1912*, Lavauzelle, París, 1913; Boucabeille, *La Guerre Turco-Balkanique 1912*, Chapelot, París 1913; more recent, Barbara Jelavich, *History of the Balkans: Twentieth Century*, volumen 2, Cambridge University Press, 1983.

³⁶ John Shy y Thomas W. Collier, *La Guerra Revolucionaria en Peter Paret*, Creadores de la Estrategia Moderna, Ministerio de Defensa, Madrid, 1991, pg 854.

³⁷ Bogdan Denitch, *Nacionalismo y Etnicidad. La Trágica Muerte de Yugoslavia*, Siglo XXI editores, Madrid, 1995, página 125.

³⁸ The author gives three arguments that made such a union impossible: Bulgaria's excessive territorial aspirations concerning both Macedonia and Thassaloniki, the Italian and Austro-Hungarian interest on the Mediterranean which led to the creation of Albania to hamper Greece's, Montenegro's and Serbia's aspirations, and Russia's attitude, who was unable to properly manage the situation leading to the loss of a great part of its position in Sofia (and the possibility of physical presence in the straits) thus being closer to Serbia. Richard C., Hall, *The Balkans Wars. Prelude to World War I*, Routledge, London, 2000, pg 139.

Yugoslavia and the “current Macedonia”

After the conclusion of the Balkan Wars, part of the Macedonian region ended under the aegis of Serbia (the so-called Slavic Macedonia), although, as has been made evident, the situation is far from being stable. In fact, World War I breaks out in July 28, 1914.

During the same period as WWI (1914-1918), the importance of the region is reflected on the existence of the so-called “Macedonian Front” (or Thessaloniki Front), in which part of the allied countries (the Austro-Hungarian and German Empires, and once the war had started: Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire), fought against the Central Powers, especially against France, Italy and the United Kingdom. These latter sent troops in 1915 to help Serbia, even though the weapons of the central powers were the most dominant ones in the region, almost until the conclusion of the contest.

After the defeat of the central powers, the end of the Great War (which caused the disappearance of four empires) brought a new “reordering” of territories, countries and borders. This subsequently led in 1918 to the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenians, in which Macedonia is found, with borders as we know them today (largely derived from the treaties of the Balkan Wars), under Serbian sovereignty.

From that point onwards, the fate of Macedonia (making reference to the territories of present-day Macedonia) will be connected to Yugoslavia's fate. The name

Yugoslavia was used from 1929 onwards, to refer to the old kingdom. It was invaded by the Axis Powers' troops during World War II and suffered inefably during this period (as a result of the fight against the invader, and the internal struggle between ethnic groups and between political opponents). After the war, Macedonia became one of the Republics of Yugoslavia (as an autonomous state in contrast to being under the aegis of Serbia), [in order to achieve balance and stability in a very complex Yugoslavia].³⁹



Macedonia y resto de países de la extinta Yugoslavia

³⁹ A brief analysis on this issue, centred on the Albanian ethnicity and the territory of Kosovo, can be found at Pedro Sánchez Herráez, *Kosovo. ¿El camino hacia...? (Parte I)*, Documento de Análisis 21/2015, de 15 de abril de 2015, Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos. Available at: http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2015/DIEEEA212015Kosovo_Camino_hacia_Partel_PSH.pdf

Therefore, after Tito's death in 1980, a complex disintegration process began, which had started in the 70s with the resistance to the Yugoslav cohesion in certain territories, sometimes used as a model to be followed by many European nationalisms.⁴⁰ In the case of the peripheral Yugoslav republic of Macedonia, one of the poorest republics of the Federation, and with its internal problems (such as the dispute between Slavic Macedonians and Albanian Macedonians) growing, along with the increasing power that a broader national framework with more absorption and action capacity granted the Macedonians, was unclear on what path to follow.

In fact, the suggestion from Slovenia and Croatia (the two republics chiefly responsible for the breakdown of Yugoslavia, especially Slovenia which was the richest) of transforming Yugoslavia into a Confederation of independent states as an alternative to the increasingly evident disintegration of Yugoslavia, was strongly opposed by Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Macedonia.⁴¹ This last one, in view of the great ethnic diversity of its population, worried it could not maintain its sustainability as an independent state in a confederation created on the basis of ethnicity.

Slovenia and Croatia declared their independence on June 25 1991. Armed confrontations began the day after: from June 26 to July 6, the "Ten Day War" was fought in Slovenia, followed by the bombing of Vukovar (the "Croatian Stalingrad") in August, and the war started to spread.

The efforts of the European Community and the United Nations to coordinate the positions of member states regarding the recognition of Slovenia and Croatia as independent states did not succeed. And, while Germany, which had recently been reunited and was a key element for the formation of this new Europe, was firmly in favour of recognizing the independence of this nations (in an attempt to recover its secular sphere of influence), the dominant position was to argue that such recognition could trigger a chain reaction that could end up with a war in Bosnia and probably in Macedonia too.

⁴⁰ It is necessary to consider, as it is the object of numerous papers and doctoral theses (for example, the one written by the author of this article), the form in which Yugoslavia was born, creating from outside an artificial and heterogeneous country with no previous origins, on the basis of entities that were sometimes very homogenous and had a temporal development. The experiment surprisingly succeeded for a certain period of time on the basis of a collective transformation after the atrocities that occurred during World War II, but also after the figure and work carried out by Tito, the true Yugoslav referent. Likewise, the way it disappeared, in a lack of leadership environment along with an economic crisis and extreme nationalisms which were ethnic-based (hence the harshness of the subsequent war), which all together manipulate myths and weaknesses to achieve individual objectives, ending an "experiment," which although having worked (in fact, it exists and is a reality known as "Yugo-nostalgia"), has a history of just over 70 years. Any comparison or search for similarities in certain aspects between Yugoslavia and most of the world's long-lasting nations can only be understood as an absolute lack of knowledge or precision.

⁴¹ Sabrina P. Ramet, *The Three Yugoslavias: State building and Legitimation, 1918-2005*, Woodrow Wilson Center Press, Washington, 2006, pg 375.

Finally, Macedonia proclaimed its independence on September 8 following a plebiscite in which the Albanian minority voted overwhelmingly against independence. As a result, this key cornerstone of the Balkans and Europe began its journey as an independent nation (lacking recognition of the international community), although from that same moment, a vast quantity of internal and external problems would strike the country, many of which had already been present for a long time, and others developed from its new situation. These new problems threatened its own existence as a nation-state.

The predictions of the majority of state's position regarding the outbreak of a war in Bosnia would end up materializing in March 1992. Would the same thing happen in Macedonia?

Conclusions

Obviously, it seems easy to answer this question a decade and a half later, even though a deeper analysis shows a serious attempt at a civil war, a great weakness of institutions and a constant threat to its own viability as a state. This has in turn led to the permanent intervention of the international community in Macedonia, in many different ways. Some of these range from missions from the United Nations and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to enormous development aid, with the aim of strengthening this young nation that still carries old and serious problems. The answer to the question may still be open.

Macedonia is the central “motor,” surrounded by most of the Balkans' “activity,” given its position in a very complex geographical, human, historical and cultural environment. If the “motor “brakes or blocks, the “activity” weakens or breaks without doubt.

In the past, the term “Macedonian question” was used to define the dispute over the relative small territory, including the Macedonian historical region in its widest stage, where very powerful and mutually exclusive forces were involved in such a small territory.

The secular dispute over Macedonia originates from the importance of the territory. If it remains important, and most of the existing internal disputes have not been resolved, facing potentially new or renewed external pressures; could we be talking of a new Macedonian struggle?

It may be convenient to present this issue with a greater detail and dedicate to it a specific analysis.

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