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The Hellenic tail must not wag the European dog

By Marko Attila Hoare, 31st December 2007

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1. Greece and Cyprus are, over Macedonia, Serbia and Kosovo, pursuing policies motivated by nationalist concerns that are out of keeping with democratic values and counter to EU interests.**
- 2. Greece and Cyprus have since the early 1990s consistently pursued destructive policies in South East Europe that have proved highly damaging vis-a-vis both Turkey and the former Yugoslavia.**
- 3. For the sake of regional stability, and to set an example for how new EU member-states should behave, it is time for the Western alliance to cease to tolerate Greek and Cypriot mischief-making.**

The ideal of the European Union presupposes that member-states will pursue national policies that take into account the interests of the union as a whole. This means they should not try to drag the EU behind policies that are wholly against its interests, and that merely reflect the exclusive nationalism of the member-states in question. Yet this is precisely what the EU's two most south-easterly member-states, first Greece and then Cyprus, have tried to do repeatedly since the early 1990s. In several spheres, Greece and Cyprus are pursuing policies that are wholly determined by nationalist motives, that have nothing to do with EU or Western interests or values and that are potentially highly damaging and dangerous. This cannot be allowed to continue if we are to maintain stability in South East Europe.

Greece threatens to veto the entry of Macedonia into NATO unless Macedonia changes its name. This represents the continuation of one of the most farcical episodes in the history of national chauvinism in Europe in the last two decades: Greece's attempt since the early 1990s to prevent Macedonia using its name. Greece's 'justification' for this, if that word can be used in this context, is that the historic land of Macedonia was solely 'Greek', that the ancient Macedonian conqueror Alexander the Great was 'Greek', and that therefore Greece has an exclusive right to the use of the name 'Macedonia', rather like a corporation's exclusive right to its logo.

It should not be necessary to engage in the childish debate about whether Alexander or ancient Macedon really was 'Greek' or not - every undergraduate student of nationalism knows that one cannot simply transpose modern national identities back onto ancient historical figures and lands; still less can ancient history be allowed to determine modern geopolitics. The very fact that contemporary Greek politicians and intellectuals attempt to do just this is evidence that Greece has not yet made the transition to genuinely post-nationalist, twenty-first-century politics. The background to Greece's bizarre hang-up over the Macedonian name is the conquest of part of the Ottoman territory of Macedonia by the Greek state in 1912-13 - a part that was less than 50% Greek in ethnic terms at the time - and the subsequent brutal Hellenisation of this territory through the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Muslims and Slavs, the settling on it

of Orthodox Greek refugees and the forced assimilation of the remaining non-Greeks through the suppression of their language and identity - something that reached its peak under the fascist dictatorship of Ioannis Metaxas in the late 1930s and after the Greek Civil War of the 1940s.

Greece's policy of denying the existence of a Macedonian nation while asserting the exclusively 'Greek' character of historic Macedonia thus represents the last dregs of a nationalist policy of forced homogenisation. It is equivalent to Turkey's attempt forcibly to assimilate its ethnic Kurds on the grounds that they are 'really' Turks and its continued denial of the Armenian Genocide, or to Serbia's claim to Kosovo as a 'Serb land' on the grounds that there are a handful of medieval Serbian monasteries there. If the EU is to have any meaning at all, it has to have a zero-tolerance approach to exclusivist national ideologies of this type. The Turkish Kurds can call themselves Kurds and speak, write and be educated in Kurdish if they want to; the people of Kosovo can decide for themselves if they want to be part of Serbia or not; and the Macedonians and the Greeks both have the same right to use the Macedonian name. End of discussion.

Yet it is not solely for the sake of our values, but also for the sake of our geopolitical interests that we must take a hard line in opposing Greece over Macedonia. The embargo imposed by Greece on Macedonia after the latter seceded from Yugoslavia in 1991-92 and the bullying that forced Macedonia to change its flag, and to enter the UN under the clumsy acronym 'FYROM' (Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) dangerously contributed to the destabilisation of this fragile and strategically sensitive state. Western policy-makers have long been aware that Macedonia could not be allowed to collapse - unlike Bosnia, its collapse could lead to two NATO states, Greece and Turkey, coming into conflict with one another. Hence the US made it clear to Slobodan Milosevic, right from the start in the early 1990s, that Serbia would not be permitted to extend the war into Macedonia; hence Macedonia's peaceful secession from Yugoslavia; hence NATO's intervention in Kosovo in 1999, as Milosevic's ethnic-cleansing of the Kosovo Albanians threatened to upset Macedonia's own delicate ethnic balance between ethnic Macedonians and Albanians. In recent weeks,

Turkey and Greece have [rebuked each other](#) over the issue of Macedonia's name. Although Turkey is wrong about a lot of things (including Cyprus and Iraqi Kurdistan), on this issue it is entirely in the right and playing a [constructive role](#). For the sake of its own fragile stability and the equally fragile stability of South East Europe, Macedonia's rapid entry into NATO is imperative.

Greece's obstructionism over Macedonia is not an isolated quirk, but forms part of a wider regional policy guided by nationalist concerns that has significantly damaged Western interests since the early 1990s - although, to be fair, it was not entirely out of keeping with the narrow-minded Western policy toward the Balkans of the first half of the 1990s. Greece supported Milosevic's Serbia more wholeheartedly than did any other state; Milosevic was more popular in Greece than he ever was in Serbia itself; Greek fascist paramilitaries participated in the Serb conquest of Srebrenica in 1995. The Greek journalist Takis Michas has described the virulence of Greek support, both at the elite and at the popular level, for Serbian imperialism and ethnic-cleansing in his brilliant but shocking book, ['Unholy Alliance: Greece and Milosevic's Serbia'](#) (Texas A&M University Press, 2002). Kostas Simitis's PASOK government half-heartedly acquiesced in NATO's intervention against Milosevic in Kosovo in the face of almost total public opposition and an outpouring of anti-American and anti-Western bile that found murderous expression in the [assassination](#) in June 2000 of the British defence attache in Athens, Brigadier Stephen Saunders, by the terrorist group 'November 17', supposedly in revenge for the Kosovo war. More recently, in January of this year left-wing terrorists [launched an anti-tank grenade](#) at the US embassy in Athens. In Greece, as in Serbia and Russia, the extremes of left and right find common ground in hatred of the US and the West. This red-brown current tends to agitate for more extreme nationalistic and anti-Western policies than those actually pursued by Greek governments themselves, which is another reason why such policies should be opposed on principle.

Greece remains Serbia's most loyal ally in the EU, and is currently attempting to [lead a Balkan bloc](#), made up of Romania and a more

lukewarm Bulgaria, that favours Serbia's rapid entry into the EU, irrespective of Serbia's behaviour over Kosovo and over the arrest of war-criminals. This is damaging to Western efforts to resolve the issue of Kosovo and the war-criminals, and to establish a united diplomatic front vis-a-vis Russia. Ironically, Greece's behaviour shows why we should *not* allow countries such as Serbia and Turkey into the EU unless they are prepared to abandon national chauvinism and small-mindedness; we want them in, but as responsible democracies, not as nationalistic trouble-makers.

It is not only in the Balkans where Greece has pursued a selfish and destructive policy at the expense of EU interests. Earlier this decade, indicating just how far it was prepared to jeopardise the entire EU project for its own ends, Greece **threatened to veto** the EU's expansion into Eastern Europe unless Cyprus were included in the expansion. There were very sound reasons why a divided Cyprus should not have been allowed to join the EU, and these immediately became clear. In a referendum in 2004, the Greek Cypriot electorate, under the guidance of Cyprus's crude nationalist president, Tassos Papadopoulos, overwhelmingly rejected the Annan Plan for Cyprus's reunification. With EU membership already safely in the bag, Papadopoulos judged that Cyprus as an EU member would be in a strong position to extract a better deal from Turkey. Greece's New Democracy government under Kostas Karamanlis, for its part, refused unambiguously to endorse the Annan Plan, something that might have encouraged the Greek Cypriots to vote in favour; Greece thus studiously failed to help clear up the mess it had made.

Had EU membership been made conditional upon acceptance of the Annan Plan by the Greek Cypriot electorate, the latter would almost certainly have voted in favour, and this old wound in the flank of the Western alliance would finally have been healed. As things stand, a settlement is now less likely than ever. There is every reason to believe that Papadopoulos and other Greek Cypriot politicians prefer the status quo in Cyprus to any reasonable compromise settlement, and are entirely ready in principle to veto Turkish EU membership indefinitely, pending the total Turkish capitulation that will never happen. Paradoxically, of course, the Cypriots **do not wish** to

see Turkey driven away from the EU entirely, as then their veto loses all coercive power; Papadopoulos's strategy is a contradictory and self-defeating one. However wrong Turkey's policy toward Cyprus was and remains, over the Annan Plan it showed itself to be the more reasonable and flexible side. Greece's pursuit of its own nationalist agenda has introduced the Cyprus dispute, like a foreign disease, into the very heart of the EU; last autumn, the EU **suspended** eight of the negotiating chapters of Turkey's accession talks in retaliation for Turkey's refusal to open its ports and airports to Cypriot ships and planes. Cyprus is now in a position to pursue indefinitely its own selfish and self-defeating nationalist agenda at the expense of EU-Turkish relations. The Hellenic tail has wagged the European dog.

One of the smallest and newest EU member-states, Cyprus is also the most hard-line in its **outright opposition** to Kosovo's independence. So far as the Papadopoulos regime is concerned, EU unity, Western interests and regional stability count for nothing: all that matters is that Kosovo's independence should be opposed, lest it set a precedent for the international recognition of Turkish-occupied northern Cyprus. That there are no indications whatsoever that Western states or anyone else will follow up the recognition of Kosovo by recognising northern Cyprus is deemed irrelevant. The Papadopoulos regime, pursuing its own policy of indefinite obstructionism, is no doubt disconcerted by the fact that Serbia's similar obstructionism over Kosovo is going to be definitely punished by the US and the EU. The so-called 'Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus' is simply a creation of the illegitimate Turkish occupation, therefore not equivalent to Kosovo, which was a recognised member of the former Yugoslav Federation. Still, it will do Cyprus no harm if it learns from the Serbian example that the principle of 'inviolable territorial integrity' is not a trump card that bloody-minded states can play indefinitely.

For too long, we have allowed Greek nationalism to poison Western policy. To some extent, this is the result of our own policy errors toward the people of Greece and Cyprus over the last sixty years or more. In one of the sorrier episodes of the early Cold War, we allowed a short-sighted anti-Communist

agenda to lead us to support the motley alliance of chauvinist and ultra-reactionary elements, many of them former Nazi collaborators, which made up the anti-Communist side in the Greek Civil War, against a Greek left that had led one of the most impressive anti-Nazi resistance movements in all occupied Europe. It is a moot point whether the anti-Communist victory in Greece served our interests any better than the Communist victory in Yugoslavia; Tito's Yugoslavia proved more than adept at resisting Soviet domination, while the brutal anti-Communist victory in Greece laid down a repressive and chauvinistic legacy for the country that found its most extreme expression in the Colonels' dictatorship of 1967-74, and from which Greece has still not entirely recovered. The extreme anti-Communist and former Nazi-collaborator, Georgios Grivas, repaid our support to his side in the Greek Civil War by launching an uprising against British rule in Cyprus in 1955 through the EOKA movement; Grivas's attacks on Turkish Cypriot civilians sowed the seeds of Cyprus's future tragedy. Our misguided response to the Greek Cypriot national movement for union with Greece was to play Turkey off against Greece over Cyprus; this policy of divide-and-rule, coupled with the suicidal ultra-nationalist policy of first Grivas and then the Greek Colonels, paved the way in 1974 for the Turkish occupation of Cyprus, something that remains a thorn in the side of the Western alliance to this day.

It is time to turn our back on this long and undistinguished tradition of a *modus vivendi* between the Western alliance and Greek nationalism, one that has proved consistently damaging to all concerned. There must be zero tolerance of Greek and Cypriot obstruction over Macedonia, Turkey and Kosovo (to be fair, Greece itself has bravely [come out in support](#) of Turkish EU membership, in defiance of popular Greek opinion, indicating an enlightened stance on this issue at least). Every time the Greeks or Cypriots try to undermine EU policy or drag it behind them for the sake of their own retrograde nationalism, we should pursue a determined effort to isolate them. Such an effort will pay dividends: not only will it put an end to a persistent policy of trouble-making, but it will set an example for how other new EU member-states should behave.

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