Abstract: During the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s, the notion of a Greek-Serbian friendship as a traditional bond between the two nations dominated the public discourse in both countries. Against the background of the changes in Southeast Europe and the crisis in Greece at the end of the 1980s, the discourse of Greek-Serbian friendship evolved as a broad social phenomenon encompassing diplomatic initiatives as well as activities of individuals and civil groups. Based on alleged common historical experiences, accelerated feelings of insecurity and foreign policy considerations, it facilitated a far-reaching emotionalisation and mobilisation, especially of the Greek public. As a prism that refracts the multiple socio-political processes of the 1990s, the Greek-Serbian friendship allows to make a contribution to the study of historical imaginations, political representations and concepts of belonging, as well as to debates about the reading of the past and present and the interrelation between politics and public sentiment.

"The Serbs are just like us, they are tough, they fight with knives and don’t forget what you have done to them. “
A Kalynnian shepherd in his seventies, early1990s
(Sutton 1998: 162)

Introduction

The end of the Cold War and the outbreak of the Yugoslav wars initiated tremendous changes in the whole region of Southeast Europe. The 1990s marked a period of transition not only in the former Socialist states, but also in Greece, being the only Western democracy at this time in the Balkans, member of the NATO and the EC, as well as the most prosperous economy. As a majority of Greek political analysts had suggested, Greece should have used this opportunity in the 1990s to establish itself as the leader in the region, the promoter of stability and integration into the Western structures, but the contrary took place: Greece became, as Sotiris Wallden stated, “part of the Balkan problem, and not part of the solution” (Βαλντέν 2003: 408; Βαρέμης 1994; Ροζάκης 1994; Anastasakis 2009).

The break-up of the Yugoslav federation posed multiple challenges to Greece: first of all, the independence of a state under the name of Macedonia and as a result the dominance of the name dispute in the foreign and domestic politics of Greece. The outcome was a strong emotional mobilisation of the Greek public and diaspora on the one hand. On the other, the position in the name dispute contributed to the isolation of Greece in the international community, especially after the declaration of embargo against the Northern neighbour in February 1994 (e.g. Tziampiris 2000).

Second, the Yugoslav break-up facilitated the emergence of the so-called Greek-Serbian friendship, the notion of a traditional bond between the two nations. Within this discourse, the
shared Orthodox faith and Byzantine heritage, the pioneering task in the “national uprisings” against the Ottomans as well as the co-belligerence in different wars were defined as determining factors that constitute a “traditional and historical friendship”, or as the president of the Society of Serbian-Greek friendship puts it: “The Serbs and the Greeks are the only two nations on the Balkans, which have not fought against each other in centuries, while they have always been on the same side during the 20th century.” (Vesti 2009) This idea of solidarity and proximity gained wide support in both countries during the 1990s, but especially among the Greek public, as is apparent in the huge amount of humanitarian aid that was collected almost exclusively for Serbian war victims and the media coverage of the war in Bosnia that overwhelmingly portrayed Bosnian Muslims and Croats as the main perpetrators in the conflict. Moreover, it can be seen in the politics of the Greek officials for whom it became increasingly difficult to fulfill their obligations towards their Western allies with regard to the international isolation of the Milošević regime and to take care of the demands of a “Serb-friendly“Greek public (Κοντόνης 2003; Βαλντέν 2004 ). The popularity of Radovan Karadžić strikingly epitomises this rift between Greece and its Western partners. At this time an outcast in Western Europe, the leader of the Bosnian Serbs was warmly welcomed in the Piraeus Stadium in June 1993 where he stated that “Everybody is telling us to lay down our arms because we are alone. We say no, we are not alone. We have with us God and the Greeks!” (Michas 2002: 22ff.; Karčić 2008; Τζίμας 2014).

As a result, by the mid-1990s, Greece had manoeuvred itself into an offside position in the international community, because of its tough stance in the name dispute with the Northern neighbour and the strong sympathies of the Greek public with the Serbian side in the Yugoslav conflict. The question remains: Why? Why did the Greek public largely support the Serbs during the Yugoslav wars? How could the idea of a traditional Greek-Serbian friendship mobilise the Greek society to such a great extent and what does this discourse imply? Or in lay language: Why did the “Greeks” love the “Serbs”? And since we are dealing with “love”, another question arises immediately: What about the “Serbs”? Did they “love” the “Greeks”, too?

The subject of the Greek-Serbian friendship in the 1990s is a contested one. While some just take it for granted as the “natural” outcome of common historical experiences and cultural traditions, others criticise it vehemently as “noisy rhetorics” of nationalists and a “hollow discourse” without real content. Yet, the analysis of this phenomenon offers new perspectives for exploring socio-political change, concepts of belonging and the role of emotions in processes of identity formation (Frevert 2009; Demertzis 2013). The Greek-Serbian friendship in the 1990s is not only a valuable case study of how selective images of history are created through rhetorical strategies based on the “emotional” in order to construct a historical continuity that is interpreted as “traditional“. Moreover, it derives a system of values that is rooted in the master-narratives of both nations. While simultaneously interweaving perceptions of the past and the present, the Greek-Serbian friendship thus contributes to a special sense of identity and groupness (Brubaker 2004).

**The emotionalisation of the Greek-Serbian friendship**

The notion of friendship between Greece and Serbia has been accompanying Greek-Serbian relations at least from the 1860s onwards, when it evolved in the Greek public as the idea of an alliance against the Ottomans (Gounaris 2004; Livanios 2003). As a top-down-discourse following the political upswings and downswings, it was stressed in times of co-belligerence, i.e. in the Balkan and World Wars, and neglected in times of conflict as it was the case during and after the Greek Civil War. But although historical examples of positive stereotyping of
the other existed in the past, it was not until the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s that the idea of a traditional friendship gained wide support in the Greek and Serbian public. As Leonidas Karakatsanis has argued in his analysis of the discourse of Greek-Turkish friendship, the dry diplomatic language lacked an important feature – “passion”, “it did not reach the hearts of the people” (Karakatsanis 2013; Karakatsanis 2014). This is what changed with the outbreak of the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s. The Greek-Serbian friendship became a reality through friendship associations, humanitarian aid initiatives, town twinning projects, solidarity concerts and other performances on the ground (Σκλίας, Π., και Αστέρης Χ., 2002). It emerged as a bottom-up process of individuals and groups that was supported by a top-down discourse of Greek officials who tried to capitalise on the good relations with the Milošević regime to prevent border changes, to gain support in the dispute with Macedonia and to foster internationally the image of Greece as an “honest broker” in the Balkans. The Greek-Serbian friendship contributed as an everyday practice to the feeling of “cultural intimacy” (Herzfeld 2005) between Greeks and Serbs. Thus, they became in-group members of an “imagined community of underdogs” (Anderson 1991; Diamandouros 1994).

What lies at the core of the Greek-Serbian friendship are emotions: first of all, fear, the feeling that the nation is in danger. This was triggered by threat scenarios, most prominent the idea of an Islamic arch in the Balkans, endangering the Orthodox countries Serbia and Greece; then, the feeling of inferiority towards the West, of being a pawn in the hands of foreign powers accompanied by the popular reading of the past as a plot in which the Greek and Serbian people were victims of foreign conspiracies. This materialised in a strong anti-American/anti-Western sentiment. As David Sutton has shown in his ethnographical study on the island of Kalymnos, Greeks identified with Serbs through perceived similarities and historical parallels - according to this reading, it was Western power politics that were both in Cyprus and Yugoslavia responsible for the violent separation of the countries (Sutton 1998). Both Greece and Serbia were underdogs, having the world community against them. This anti-Western sentiment or underdog discourse gained dominance especially during the Kosovo war and the NATO intervention in 1999 (e.g. Stefanidis 2007; Tsakona 2005; Katsioulis 2002; Tsatsanis 2011). The Greek public, reaching from right-wing Orthodox nationalists to far-left communists, strongly opposed the bombing that was interpreted, as a war between the whole world against the Serbian people – the initial conflict between the Kosovo Liberation Army and the central government in Belgrade was mostly overlooked.

In order to examine “the receptive dispositions that have been quietly laid down in those to whom the rhetorics of nationalists appeal” (Verdery 1996: 229), we have to place emphasis on the “populist decade” of PASOK in power from 1981-89, in which the antagonistic discourse of the non-privileged people fostered a defensive, ethnocentric and anti-Western version of Greek nationalism (Clogg 1993). Moreover, the social, economic and political crisis in Greece in 1989, in combination with the regional turmoil, the break-up of Yugoslavia, the influx of thousands of Albanian immigrants, accelerated feelings of insecurity and made the Greek public more prone to populist discourses and interpretations.

The war in Bosnia played a crucial role in the emotionalisation of the Greek-Serbian friendship, since the discourse changed from being friends to becoming brothers. The Bosnian Serbs were overwhelmingly portrayed as victims of the war, a conspiracy of Croats and Muslims supported by the US. There was barely any space left for the victims of Srebrenica in this reading, since the Greek public was occupied almost completely with the fate of the Serbian refugees from Krajina in the summer of 1995. The case of the Greek volunteers that were fighting on the side of the Bosnian Serbs was popularised intensively, thus spreading the
notion that Greek interests were defended in the war in Bosnia (Michas 2002: 17ff.; Καθάριος 2007; Mitrofanova 2005).

Another important feature which facilitated the strong emotional reaction to the conflict were programmes of hosting (almost exclusively) Serbian children from Bosnia and Krajina in Greek families (Blagojević 2010). The personal ties that developed between the children and the Greek host families were often translated into empathy and enmity on the national and international level.

A mutual friendship?

In her study on stereotype of Serbian intellectuals in the 19th and 20th century, Milosavljević states that “In contrast to the terms Majka Rusija [Mother Russia] and Braća Rusi [Brothers Russians], which are known for the last 100 years, Braća Grci [Brothers Greeks] is a completely new product of the current media without any basis in the past. In fact, the Greeks had a very bad standing in the 'characterology’ of Serbian intellectuals, sometimes even worse than the Bulgarians, and the fact that they were Orthodox as well did not change anything.“ (Milosavljević 2002: 279). Due to the negative image of the Greek dominated Orthodox clergy as corrupt and greedy, Greeks were primarily characterised as “friends of the Turks”, “haters of the Slavs“ and ”racketeers“ in the Serbian public discourse and literature of the 19th century (Ristić 2006), whereas articulations of friendship can be traced historically more often in the Greek discourse about the Serbs. Indeed, negative stereotypes about the southern neighbour were common in the Serbian public at the end of the 1980s due to politicised conflicts, regarding the “Macedonian question” and transborder cooperation (Borba 1988; Ekspres Politika 1988), as well as the bad standing of Greek students who made up the majority of foreign students in Yugoslavia (Pavićević 2004). But in the course of the war, the notion of Greek-Serbian friendship began to gain support in the Serbian society as well: first, due to structural similarities in the national narratives, the existence of a left-wing populist discourse, as well as anti-Western and anti-Muslim sentiments (Keridis 1998; Ramet, Sabrina P. and Vjeran P. 2005). Second, it was the experience of being isolated in the international community and vindicated by virtually the whole world, while at the same time experiencing on an everyday basis Greek humanitarian aid, support, delegations from Greek official as well as NGOs.

But in contrast to the Greek public, the Greek-Serbian friendship did not achieve such a widespread impact and appeal on the Serbian society. It served primarily the political discourse of Milošević and Karadžić and the strengthening of their power position. Since Greece was more or less the only European country that maintained relations with the Milošević regime and the Bosnian Serbs, the visits of Greek officials were used to legitimise the regime in the Serbian media. However, it was not only the domestic public that was addressed by this discourse, but also the Greek. Milošević and Karadžić visited Greece on different occasions. Well known is the visit of Milošević to Greece in 1992, when he proposed a Greek-Serbian confederation (Eleftherotypia 1992; Borba 1992), thus picking up the popular rallying cry on mass demonstrations in Greece “There is only one solution [to the Macedonian question] – common borders with Serbia!” (Michas 2002; Skordos 2012). Less known is Karadžić’s decision to introduce Greek as the first foreign language in the Republika Srpska (Ethnos 1994).
“Mas horepsan serviko” – Ambivalences and limits of the Greek-Serbian friendship

The proposition of a Greek-Serbian confederation in 1992 did not deter Milošević to recognise the independence of the Republic of Macedonia under its constitutional name in April 1996, which caused enraged reactions and feelings of “betrayal” in the Greek press (Eleftherotypia 1996). These ruptures and cleavages that result from the clash of the postulated friendship and the actual everyday praxis are especially important, as they offer insights into the ambivalences and the functioning of the Greek-Serbian discourse of friendship. In this regard, sport competitions prove to be valuable case studies. For instance, the final match of the European Basketball championship in July 1995 in Athens between Yugoslavia and Lithuania was followed by violent incidents. The Greek audience cheered against the Yugoslavs, who had eliminated the Greek team in the tournament, booed them after their victory against Lithuania and several spectators threw objects on the court. This triggered violent attacks on the Greek embassy in Belgrade with demonstrators carrying banners that stated “Cyprus is Turkish”, and Greek students being beaten up in the streets of the Yugoslav capital. The Greek media and officials reacted in the following days by printing apologies in Serbian on front pages of Greek newspapers (Ethnos 1995), whereas the Serbian press classified these incidents as a proof for the artificial nature of the Greek-Serbian friendship or ironised them (NIN 1995).

In conclusion, to dismiss the Greek-Serbian friendship in the 1990s as an “empty discourse“ or a “propagandistic tool“ that was fostered by the media and political elites, would be a shortsighted assessment that would ignore the impact and broad appeal of the phenomenon on both societies. As a prism that refracts the multiple socio-political processes of the 1990s, the Greek-Serbian friendship rather allows to make a contribution to the study of historical imaginations, political representations, social cleavages and concepts of belonging – in short, the social, political and cultural climate in Greece and Serbia during the 1990s – as well as to larger debates about the logic of friendship and enmity, the reading of the past and present and the interrelation between politics and public sentiment.
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