

ASPECTS OF THE BULGARIAN INFLUENCE IN THE EUROPEAN REGIONS BELONGING TO THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE IN THE LATTER PART OF THE 19TH AND THE FIRST PART OF THE 20TH CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

The general characteristic of the Christian populations in the Macedonian area, regardless of whether we are talking about Slavs, Albanians, or Aromanians, in the middle of the 19th century, was the Greek influence exerted in various stages on the groups mentioned above. In fact, Bulgarian propaganda came to stop the Hellenizing fervour, offering Balkan Slavs tools for identity survival in the face of Greek assimilationist actions. For the Bulgarians, sustaining their influence in the European territories that belonged to the Ottoman Empire until the outbreak of the Balkan Wars was motivated by the historical legacy of the 10th century Bulgarian tsarate. One of the most powerful Bulgarian institutions was the Church, which once through the recognition of the Exarchate within the Ottoman Empire acquired a decisive role in the heart of the Bulgarian communities in the Balkans.

Keywords: Bulgarian Exarchate, Balkans, Ottoman Empire, Hierarch Yosif Yovchev, Macedonia.

“I have written for those who love the Bulgarian people and homeland, for those who want to know the people and the language (...) But there are also those who are not interested in learning about the Bulgarian people and listen to what they hear through foreigners; they do not care for their Bulgarian language, but learn to read and speak Greek, and are ashamed to call themselves Bulgarians. Oh, mindless fools! Why are you ashamed to call yourselves Bulgarians and not learn to read and speak your language? Didn't the Bulgarians have either a kingdom or a country? (...) Of the entire the Slavic race, the Bulgarians had the greatest glory, they were the first to call themselves tsars, they became the first Christians and they also ruled over the greatest lands (...) But why, you fools, are you ashamed of your people and yearn for another language?” Monk Paisie, considered the father of Bulgarian nationalism⁹⁹.

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⁹⁹ „Am scris pentru cei ce vă iubiți poporul și patria bulgară, pentru cei care vor vrea să cunoască oamenii și limba (...) Mai sunt însă și cei pe care nu-i preocupă să afle despre poporul bulgar și pleacă urechea la ce se aude prin străini; lor nu le pasă de limba lor bulgară, dar învață să citească și să vorbească grecește și le e rușine să-și spună bulgari. O, nesăbuiți fără minte! De ce vă e rușine să vă spuneți bulgari și nu învățați să citiți și să vorbiți pe limba voastră? Oare nu au avut bulgarii nici regat și nici țară?...Din toată rasa slavă, bulgarii au avut parte de gloria cea mai mare, ei au fost primii care și-au zis țari, ei au devenit primii creștini și tot ei au stăpânit peste ținuturile cele mai mari (...) Dar de ce, proștilor, vă e rușine de poporul vostru și tânjiți după altă limbă?”, in Maria Todorova, “Cursul discursurilor naționalismului bulgar” [“The course of Bulgarian nationalist discourse”] in Peter F. Sugar, *Naționalismul est-european în secolul al XX-lea [Eastern European nationalism in the 20th century]*, Bucharest, Curtea Veche Publishing House, 2002, p. 65.

INTRODUCTION

The Slavic invasion of the 5th–6th centuries meant the breaking of Eastern Romanity into two blocs, namely the Carpathian and the Balkan. The gradual Slavization led to the disappearance of the Vlachs from Bosnia, Herzegovina, Montenegro, Croatia, the Dalmatian Coast, a large part of the Vlachs from Serbia, etc.¹⁰⁰. In the 19th century, we still find Romance fragments in the area of Slavic influence only in the Istrian Peninsula, the area of Timoc (the most compact and numerous group, perhaps also due to its proximity to the Carpathian block), Meglenia (an area almost completely depopulated today), as well as the Aromanian communities in the Rhodope, Rila, Pirin mountains and area of today North Macedonia (we refer especially to the regions with Slavic majorities in the Balkan area). The general characteristic of the Christian populations in the Macedonian area, regardless of whether we are talking about Slavs, Albanians, or Aromanians, in the middle of the 19th century, was the Greek influence exerted in various stages on the groups mentioned above. In fact, Bulgarian propaganda came to stop the Hellenizing fervour, offering Balkan Slavs tools for identity survival in the face of Greek assimilationist actions.

For the Bulgarians, sustaining their influence in the European territories that belonged to the Ottoman Empire until the outbreak of the Balkan Wars was motivated by the historical legacy of the 10th century Bulgarian tsarate.

BULGARIAN NATIONAL CHURCH

As in the case of the Greek propaganda, the Bulgarian one benefited from the strong support of the Church, especially manifested after the establishment, in 1870, of the Bulgarian Exarchate, a confessional valve of the Bulgarian national consciousness. The reaction of the Bulgarian Orthodox, that of rejecting the Greek hierarchy seen as a foreign, assimilating one, determined the biggest schism within the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The 1872 synodal condemnation¹⁰¹ of the “Bulgarian

¹⁰⁰ Silviu Dragomir, *Vlahii din Nordul Peninsulei Balcanice în Evul Mediu, [The Wallachians of the Northern Balkan Peninsula in the Middle Ages]*, Publishing House of the Academy of the Romanian People’s Republic, 1959, passim.

¹⁰¹ The first text of the synod of September 1872 condemned to excommunication both clerics and those who “communicate or agree with the excommunicated ones”. At this point, however, Archbishop Sophronie of Cyprus introduced a nuance, easily interpretable, namely that: “only those who consciously follow the Bulgarian Church will be condemned to excommunication (...)”. The synodal condemnation of 1872 was not unanimous, however, because the second most important member in the diptych, the Patriarch of Jerusalem, at the time Cyril, refused to sign the condemnation of the Bulgarian Church as philetist, despite the pressure he was subjected to. Finally, although he was supported in his position by Russia, Patriarch Cyril would also be declared schismatic and removed from the diptychs by the Ecumenical Patriarch Anthim Koutalianos, the artisan of the synod of 1872, in Giorgios Michalopoulos, “Greek Historiography and the establishment of the Bulgarian Exarchate”, in Othon Anastasakis, Dimitar Bechev, and Nicholas Vrousalis (eds.), *Greece in the Balkans: Memory*,

schismatics” as Philetists canonically substantiated the fear of loss under the Greek patriarchal homophorus and other Orthodox subjects in the Balkans.

Canadian historian Andrew Rossos considered that Bulgarian propaganda represented the best articulated national strategy in the Balkans, carefully organized and strongly supported by the authorities in Sofia. Here, the central authorities worked in a Byzantine “symphony” together with the ecclesiastical ones:

“The new state and the exarchate worked as one in Macedonia. The government determined the aims and strategies of national propaganda and provided the resources, and the exarchate, with headquarters in Constantinople, dutifully carried them out in Macedonia. Financial support increased from 100,000 levas in 1881 to 574,874 in 1885 and, according to one Serbian report, to 5.5 million French francs in 1890”¹⁰².

In addition to the legalistic activity, in the spirit of the Ottoman legislation, the Bulgarian national movement also meant the militarization of a significant part of its followers, who indulged in guerrilla actions in response to the Greek aggressions. During the uprising in Krusevo in 1903, along with the irridenta sponsored by Sofia, a determined role also fell to the Vlach leaders who made common cause with the Bulgarian fighters against the Ottomans¹⁰³. The prospect of an Aromanian-Bulgarian cooperation was a serious cause for concern for Greek propaganda, which tried to inoculate the Aromanians that they were playing the Bulgarians’ game when fighting Athens, with nothing to gain from this war.

At the beginning of the 20th century, an English ethnologist described the realities encountered in Djumaya (Barakli, Serres) as follows:

“The Christian community is composed of Wallachians and Bulgarians. Both ethnicities belong to the Ecumenical Patriarchate calling themselves Greeks and support the Greek school in the city attended by 500 students”¹⁰⁴.

With such premises, Bulgarian propaganda would find a difficult opponent on the ground, however, the excellent organization of the Exarchate also provided Bulgarian propaganda with an enviable spiritual component, which would greatly

Conflict and Exchange, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle, 2009, pp. 38–39. The philetist accusation against the Bulgarians was considered by the Metropolitan of Transylvania, Andrei Șaguna, as having no canonical foundation “I don’t see any blessed and canonical cause in this scandal of the patriarchate, because we have regulatory canons in this regard, which the patriarch does not follow and the Bulgarian people are dissatisfied with the approval of the patriarchy; the thing is natural and easy to correct, if the patriarchate will respect and guard the canons and their interpretations from Pidalion, otherwise he stands ashamed before the Orthodox Church” – Andrei Șaguna to Calinic: The Metropolitan of Moldova and Suceava (27th December 1870, Sibiu) in *Andrei Șaguna. Correspondence*, First Edition, Introductory Study and Notes by: Nicolae Boșan, Ioan Vasile Leb, Gabriel Gârdan, Pavel Vesa, Bogdan Ivanov, Cluj-Napoca, Clujeană University Press, 2005, p. 254.

¹⁰² Andrew Rossos, *Macedonia and the Macedonians. A History*, Stanford University, Hoover Institution Press, 2008, p. 77. However, it should not be understood that Macedonia will acquire a Bulgarian physiognomy only after 1870, there was a vast school network long before that, in D. Mitcheff, *La verité sur la Macedoine [The truth about Macedonia]*, Berne, 1918, p. 27.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

¹⁰⁴ George Frederick Abbot, *The Tale of a Tour in Macedonia*, London, 1903, p. 63.

optimize its chances of success. The spiritual leadership of the Exarchate was taken over by Hierarch Yosif¹⁰⁵ beginning in May 1877, when he was enthroned as head of the Bulgarian Church, recognized by the Ottoman system as both the spiritual and political leader of the Bulgarian nation¹⁰⁶. The exarchate was the first Bulgarian national institution with a jurisdiction that would extend over almost all the territories inhabited by Bulgarians. The exarchate controlled churches, schools, but also the organization of local communities. As early as 1877, the Bulgarian Church managed to establish three bishoprics in Veles, Ohrid and Skopje. As after 1878 national success in Bulgaria and Eastern Rumelia was assured, Yosif proposed that the church mission should be concentrated in Macedonia in the territories remaining under Ottoman tutelage. In the vision of the exarch:

“the national revival had to be also a religious revival that allowed the Bulgarians to listen to the word of God in their own mother tongue”¹⁰⁷.

The same High Hierarch confessed that the Bulgarian Orthodox Church had to act very wisely, attentive to its various enemies: the Ecumenical Patriarchate, associated with Greek nationalism which saw in the existence of the Exarchate a major obstacle to the Hellenization of the Bulgarian population, Serbia which had the same objectives and collaborated with the Sublime Porte, the Catholic Church that wanted to profit from the internal conflict between the Orthodox and bet on proselytizing among the Bulgarians with some local success, Austria-Hungary, the “patron” of the Catholic Church that also had certain territorial claims in Macedonia, the Western Powers that saw the Bulgarian national movement as an instrument of Russian expansion, etc. Hierarch Yosif’s strategy was based on three pillars: the willingness of the Ottoman government to accept continuous concessions to the moderates, the conservatism of the Bulgarian national movement, Russian support, the “liberator of the Bulgarians”, with whom the nation was linked by Orthodoxy and Slavic sentiment, etc. The war of 1878 caused the Ottomans’ trust in the Bulgarians to fade, and until 1883 the Macedonian dioceses were left intentionally vacant, all for the benefit of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and Greek politics. Russia, for reasons of strategy, was not advantaged by the schism between the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and the Ecumenical Patriarchate, proposing a compromise solution, that of withdrawing the exarchate to Plovdiv or Sofia, leaving the Macedonian territories under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Yosif, however, responded negatively to the proposal, considering the departure an

¹⁰⁵ Born in 1840 with the common name Lazar Yovchev, he studied literature and law at the Sorbonne for three years. He returned to the Ottoman Empire, being the editor of the national cultural periodical *Chitaliste*. In 1872 he entered the service of the Bulgarian Exarchate as a monk, and four years later he was elected metropolitan of Lovech.

¹⁰⁶ F.A.K. Yasamee, “Religion, Irreligion and Nationalism in the Diaries of the Bulgarian Exarch Yosif”, in Celia Hawkesworth, Muriel Heppell, Harry Norris (eds.), *Religious Quest and National Identity in the Balkans*, London, Palgrave, pp. 203–204.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 205–206.

abandonment of the Bulgarian believers thus left prey to “Hellenization”¹⁰⁸. After 1878, the authority of the Church among the Bulgarians suffered because of the involvement of the Sofia government in the Macedonian question. The exarchate was beginning to become dependent on government subsidies once Bulgaria north of Stara Planina and Eastern Rumelia came under Sofia’s direct tutelage. State subsidies to schools and clergy in Macedonia and Southern Thrace weakened the Exarchate’s representational ties to the Sublime Porte.

In Bulgaria, power ended up in the hands of radicals or liberals who did not accept Yosif’s moderate policy, the former being considered by him to be irreligious and anti-clerical, their tolerance for partisan incursions or anti-Ottoman agitations making the Exarch unable to regain the Sultan’s trust. The tensions between these Bulgarian leaders and Russia, which unofficially abandoned them as “reds” and “atheists”, further complicated the Macedonian issue¹⁰⁹. In July 1890, Exarchist metropolitans were reinstated in Skopje and Ohrid, in 1894, two more were reinstated in Nevrokop and Veles. Yosif was pleased to have regained the ground lost in 1875. After 1886, the Ottomans also encouraged the Serbian movement as a measure to weaken the Bulgarians and divide the Slavic population. The death of Stambulov led shortly to the normalization of relations with Russia, and from 1896 to the international recognition of Prince Ferdinand as the legitimate monarch. The outbreak of war with Greece led the Porte to reward Bulgarian neutrality by appointing three new bishops at Bitolia, Debar and Strumica. The concession was balanced by the concession of generous schooling privileges to the Serbs for Macedonia. The exarch believed it was better to work for the strengthening of Bulgarian national consciousness through the Church and its schools and to postpone any change of political status in Macedonia. It was not necessary to irritate the Turks unnecessarily, he considered. On the one hand, the Bulgarian government encouraged the Exarchate to request new dioceses in the Ottoman Empire, but it also tolerated the various autonomist agitations, as well as the passage of some paramilitary troops into the Ottoman territories. The exarchate tried to develop its own policy sometimes at odds with the strategy desired by the government in Sofia. This attitude came as a result of the huge accumulated spiritual capital, which allowed him an autonomy of action for the benefit of his own parishioners. The introduction of a religious service in Slavonic by local priests carefully guided by the Bulgarian hierarchs (full bishops or vicars where the official berat were left waiting, see the attached map)¹¹⁰ provided the guarantee of a complete and solid church institution capable of gaining the adherence of ordinary Christians for centuries with a confessional tutelage, alien, after all, to the local ethos, in the present

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 205–206.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

¹¹⁰ Karl Strupp, *La situation juridique des Macedoniens en Yougoslavie [The legal situation of Macedonians in Yugoslavia]*, Paris, Les Presses Universitaires de France, 1921, p. 121.

case the Bulgarian one. The Greek professor Papadopoulos considered that in Strumitsa, a city in today's eastern Macedonia, on the border with Bulgaria, out of 15,000 inhabitants, 4,000 were Slavonic Orthodox Christians, but with a Hellenic national consciousness¹¹¹, proof of functional Hellenization.

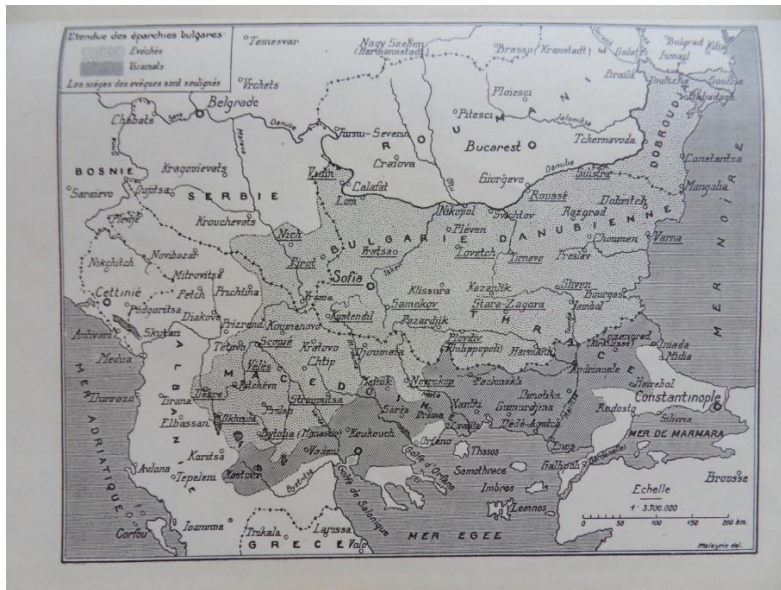


Figure 1. The Bulgarian Exarchate – the cities of residence of the episcopal seats.¹¹²

Professor Ivanoff admitted in 1906 that the Vlachs in the Meglenia area were under a strong Bulgarian influence, some villages being completely Bulgarianized, one Vlach settlement even adopting Islam, but keeping its dialect¹¹³.

If the Greeks were accused of frequently changing their students' names when registering them in the school registers, some published sources confirm that this was a practice also used by the Bulgarians in the case of Aromanian students. In a report of the Italian minister from Athens to Rome, it was stated that in 1903 the Romanian element had the Bulgarian endings -off, -eff applied to their names, and "the Koutsovlachs are considered as Greeks in Athens and as Bulgarians in Sofia"¹¹⁴.

¹¹¹ St. Papadopoulos, "Écoles et Associations Grecques dans la Macédoine du Nord durant le dernier siècle de la domination Turque" ["Greek Schools and Associations in North Macedonia during the last century of Turkish rule"], in *Macedonia Past and Present*, Institut for Balkan Studies, Salonic, 1992, p. 103.

¹¹² Karl Strupp, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

¹¹³ Jordan Ivanoff, *La Questionne Macedonienne [The Macedonian Question]*, Paris, p. 160, and the following.

¹¹⁴ Gheorghe Carageani, *Studii Aromâne [Aromanian Studies]*, Bucharest, Romanian Cultural Foundation, 1999, p. 151.

BULGARIAN SCHOOLS

Under the Ottoman government in Macedonia, the Bulgarians had in 1910–1911 in the vilayets of Macedonia a number of 1359 schools with 2203 teachers and 78,519 students¹¹⁵. Another source mentioned, for approximately the same period: 13 high schools with 148 teachers and 2191 students, 87 gymnasiums with 238 teachers and 4309 students, 1273 primary schools with 1880 teachers and 72,354 students, a total of 1373 schools, 2266 teachers and 78 854 schoolchildren, as well as 1331 churches, 294 chapels, 273 monasteries with 7 bishops. The figures above appeared in a memorandum sent to the League of Nations on February 10th, 1925, by L.L. Kisselintcheeff, president of the Central Committee of the Macedonian Political Organization¹¹⁶. According to other figures advanced by A.T. Spiliotopoulos in 1902, the Bulgarians reportedly had only 592 schools with over 30,000 students. Although according to a school report issued by the school inspectorate belonging to the Bulgarian Exarchate, for the year 1896 there were an amount of 843 Bulgarian schools with 64,432 students, many of these schools were later closed until 1902¹¹⁷. According to Hilmy Pasha¹¹⁸ – general inspector of reforms (Vilayetes of Kosova, Monastir, Thessaloniki) there were 647,000 patriarchists and 557,734 exarchists in Macedonia at the beginning of the 20th century¹¹⁹. According to another Bulgarian author, in 1897 the Exarchate had 1331 churches, 1325 priests, 294 chapels and 63 monasteries in Macedonia¹²⁰. The above figures, even if different according to the sources, indicate an extraordinary progress of the Bulgarian propaganda which catches up and tends to surpass the Greek school figures.

FINAL REMARKS

In conclusion, we can observe that the entire Bulgarian influence, exercised through the Church and the School, protected the Slavic population from the specter of Hellenization, succeeding through a well-planned strategy in just a few decades, we are referring especially to the period up to 1912, to be a formidable competitor of the assimilationist policies of Greek propaganda, that targeted the populations of Slavic origin in the Balkans but also the populations of Aromanians or Albanians.

¹¹⁵ St. N. Chichkof, *L'Hellenisme dans la peninsule balkanique [L'Hellenism in the Balkan Peninsula]*, Plovdiv, 1919, p. 52.

¹¹⁶ The National Library of Romania, Fund Al. Saint-Georges, File 103, p. 82.

¹¹⁷ Douglas Dakin, *The Greek Struggle in Macedonia 1897-1913*, Salonic, Institute for Balkan Studies, 1966, pp. 19-20.

¹¹⁸ His maternal Greek origin should be noted. The confessional figures can be considered biased in accordance with the Ottoman anti-Bulgarian policy. See Nicolae Batzaria, *Din lumea Islamului [From the world of Islam]*, Bucharest, 2003, p. 99.

¹¹⁹ Douglas Dakin, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

¹²⁰ Solaroff, *La Bulgarie et la question Macedonienne [Bulgaria and the Macedonian question]*, 1919, p. 81.

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