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**THE ROLE OF RUSSIA IN THE BALKANS
AND THE NEAR EAST**

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Summary

Post-1989 Russia must be regarded as a Great Power again. Moscow is the Third Rome, i.e. the Head of Christian Orthodoxy. And the traditional image, in the frame of which Russia and Turkey were foes throughout the centuries does not correspond to reality. Evidence may be provided by the 1833 Hünkâr İskelesi bilateral Treaty, thanks to which the thorny issue of the Straits was settled advantageously for both Empires. And given that nowadays some of the major problems of the Near East have to do with Turkey and Greece, it is imperative for Russia to undertake a mediator role, for the USA and the EU have been unable to find a solution so far.

Key Words: Hünkâr İskelesi Treaty, Cyprus, Archipelago, Macedonia.

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Traditionally speaking, the role of Russia was conceived as a beneficent one in the greater Eastern Mediterranean Region. This was quite natural as far as the Orthodox Christian populations were concerned; it is astonishing, nonetheless, that even Moslems used to regard Russia's role as such, though Russia was in conflict with the Sublime Porte from the time of Peter the Great till the Great War of 1914-1918.

It is not difficult to explain such a situation. When Russia, after the 1709 Poltava battle, became an Empire, the power of the Porte began to decline. Thus, the Ottomans' degradation was seen in a more and more appalling light, and a parallel was drawn between the Sultans' decline and the ascendancy to which the Czars' statehood rose. Truth to tell, the Russian autocrats followed a clever policy as far as their Moslem subjects were concerned. At least during the nineteenth century, Russian Emperors tried to assume the role of their protectors instead of that of their oppressors. In Dostoyevsky's time, several Christian officials were punished for "insulting behaviour" towards Moslems. And if some influential ones among the latter decided to embrace the Christian Orthodox religion, they were given high titles of nobility. The case of the Yusupov family is typical – but not the only one.

It is in a novel written by a Greek writer, Gheorghios Vizyinos (1849-1896), that this parallel is highlighted. An Ottoman, member of a –so to speak- provincial aristocratic family, took part in the 1877-1878 Russo-Turkish War and was captured by the Russians. During his stay in Russia, he made the unavoidable comparison between the Russian ascendancy and his own Motherland's degradation. He admired the Russians' behaviour towards Ottoman prisoners, and when back in Thrace, after the war was over, not being able to forget either what he had experienced in Russia or the conditions of life in his country, he became... mad.^[1]

After the First World War, moreover, this analogy was no longer necessary: Soviet Russia and the New Turkey then being created in Anatolia became allies – and it is noteworthy that Russian attitudes towards the Kemalist Movement contributed a lot to the final victory of Republican Turkey over the Greeks. In point of fact, the 1919-1922 war was not merely a Greco-Turkish one. The apple of discord was then Mosul – with its famous oilfields. In other words, the Turkish army was to be detained westwards by the Greeks, in order to avoid a Turkish attack on the Northern Iraq. The other side of the coin is that, when Russia was found to be in a critical position towards the end of 1942 because of the Stalingrad battle, Turkey rejected the prospect of entering the war on the side of Germany. The corollary is that Russia's salvation was due not

only to her own People but to Turkey's, too. What conclusions are to be drawn from this? That truth is to be found beyond the age-old image of "Turks-and- Russians-in-perpetual-conflict"; and the fact that Hünkâr İskelesi Treaty had fallen into oblivion may be useful as evidence.

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The Hünkâr İskelesi Treaty was concluded in 1833 between Russia and the Porte^[2]; and thanks to that bilateral agreement the thorny issue of the Straits was arranged profitably not only for Russia and Turkey but practically for all the populations of the Eastern Mediterranean basin. But the treaty was invalidated because of the Russophobia^[3] and the subsequent intervention of the Western Powers. Thus seeds of war were sown once more. In 1914 Turkey was to be found at war with Russia – contrary to her own vested interest.

The past, nonetheless, commands the future; and the historical experience of the Russian Lands may dictate to Russia to resume an active, an essential role in the Balkans and the Near East.

From the seventeenth century on, Moscow is the Third Rome, i.e. the head of the Christian Orthodox world^[4]. The problem created by the abolition of Moscow's Patriarchate at the beginning of the eighteenth century does not exist anymore – even though the Russian autocrats were regarded, after the Patriarchate's extinction, as quasi-Popes of the Eastern Christendom^[5]. At any rate, a Patriarch of Moscow and All The Russias does exist today and the sacrosancta of Eastern Christendom are to be found in Moscow. Russia is therefore entitled to reassume her major role as a Great Power.

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Except for the Palestine problem, the major issues in the Balkans and the Near East have to do with Greece and Turkey – the major ones being Cyprus and Archipelago (or Aegean Sea). Cyprus, first of all, was always, either overtly or covertly, considered by the Greek Governments, as an Asiatic island and not a European one. Thus, in the 1960s such was taught in Greek schools; and on this very conception was based Constantine Karamanlis' refusal in 1974 to send

Greek soldiers to Cyprus when the Turkish military intervention was taking place there. It is beyond any doubt, moreover, that the military intervention in question was fully legitimate. Under the 1960 Guarantee Treaty in fact, the United Kingdom, Greece, and Turkey had undertaken the obligation to intervene in Cyprus either collectively or unilaterally, if the constitutional order in the island was overturned^[6]. In July 1974, the Ankara government requested, before sending troops to Cyprus, the participation of Great Britain in the military operation against the regime established after Makarios was overthrown; but the British government turned this request down, and given that Greece could not act jointly with Turkey - for the Athens government had planned and set in motion the coup against Makarios - Turkey was obliged to act alone.

Today, the major complaint of the Greek side is that the Turkish troops have not been withdrawn from Cyprus – given that “constitutional order” was restored long ago. Ankara’s reply to the charge has to do with ‘historical experience’: Turkish Cypriots suffered so bitterly during the 1960s and early 1970s that they could endure to live anymore under Greek authority^[7]. The 1974 Turkish attack, therefore, must be regarded as the corollary of their sufferings. So the Cyprus issue is gridlocked – with the Greek side insisting on an oxymoron, i.e. a fictional reality, namely a unified Cyprus, with the Turkish side trying desperately to safeguard the existence of the Turkish Cypriot population.

The Archipelago issue is a more acute one. Turkey regards herself as ‘being strangled’ by the uninterrupted chain of Greek islands surrounding her; and though a country with extensive seashores, she is not in a position to be a maritime Power. In truth, these islands (Dodecanese and the Eastern Archipelago) have a Greek –or, rather, a Christian Orthodox - population. It is beyond any doubt, nonetheless, that, geographically and geologically speaking, they belong to Asia Minor, something that was categorically recognized by the Greek side at the end of the First World War^[8]. In other words, a deadlock is created in the Archipelago as well.

And last but not least: the Macedonian issue. In the 1990s, even in the school manuals, the Greek government adopted a position quite different from the actual one^[9]. It was recognized that “something had happened” in Macedonia, i.e. much ill-treatment of the autochthonous Slav populations. Today, a quite different policy is followed by Greece. As a matter of fact, the latter tries to sweep under the carpet the fact that after the First Balkan War, Macedonia was shared between Serbia, Greece, and Bulgaria; and that the nucleus of the “Macedonian Land” is to be

found in the part annexed then by Serbia – in other words in the Skopje and Monastir regions^[10]. Macedonia, moreover, was the dwelling place of the oldest Slavic population in Europe; the very one which gave World History the emperor Justinian I, the last “truly” Roman Emperor^[11].

* * *

It is a firm resolve of the Greek government that the solution to all the above issues must be found in the framework of the United Nations, the European Union - and the International Courts as well. Nonetheless, looking for solutions either via the UN, the EU or the Hague has only embittered relations so far. As a matter of fact, it is for decades that the United Nations has been trying to find a settlement of the Question of Cyprus. The result? Nothing! The situation today just in the Island is as it was in the 1970s; only the personnel has changed. Regarding the Archipelago, on the other hand, the –timid- exhortations of the Athens government by committing the matter to the arbitration of an International Court it is certain that, if accomplished, it will even bedevil the matter (most likely to the detriment of the Greek side). And the Macedonian Affair, in which the European Community systematically avoids getting involved, is already threatening the “stability” of Southeastern Europe. So, what should be done?

The answer to such a question is quite simple: Russia must undertake again her traditional role of mediator or even –why not?- arbitrator. Americans and even Europeans, though often motivated by good faith, are faced with suspicion in the Balkans and the Near East. It would be beyond the scope of this paper to find out the cause of such a situation. Nonetheless, it is true: Americans and Europeans have failed to provide tormented peoples with permanent solutions to their hardships. Russians, on the other hand, enjoy the confidence not only of the Christian peoples of the Balkans but even of the Moslem populace of the Near East. If, therefore, the Moscow government elaborates on and offers a solution to the Archipelago issue (for instance), based on geopolitical data, historical experience and mutual interests, a good beginning will be made; and the rest will come alone. In other words it is a question of daring. If Russia dares to take the first step now, a new era of understanding and prosperity will arise in a part of our planet which has severely suffered again and again over time. Of course, a problem might be created by Greece – and this would be a major paradox, for (traditionally speaking) Greeks are Russophiles.

One of the rare points, nonetheless, on which some right-wing and left-wing Greek historians agree is that the modern Greek state created thanks to the 1821 Revolution against the Porte is tributary to the Western Powers^[12]. In other words, the famous philhellenist movement that helped the Greeks decisively to gain independence was aiming mainly at the creation of a State capable of keeping back the Slavs in general and Russians in particular reaching and occupying Mediterranean seashore.

Put in a different way, Christian Orthodox Greece was conceived as a ‘vaccine’ against Christian Orthodox Slavs. And given that things in geopolitics have not changed since the nineteenth century, this factor should be seriously borne in mind when studying the issues and before making rearrangements in those countries bordering the Eastern Mediterranean Sea.

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NOTES

^[1] Gheorghios Vizyinos, *Moskov- Selim*, Athens, 1895.

^[2] See mainly Stanford J. Shaw and Ezel Kural Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*, vol. II : *The rise of Modern Turkey, 1808-1975* (Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 34-35 ; Athanase G. Politis, *Le conflit turco-égyptien de 1838-1841 et les dernières années du règne de Mohamed Aly d’après les documents diplomatiques grecs* (Cairo : Société royale de géographie d’Égypte, 1931), pp. XXIV-XXV.

[3] Stanford J. Shaw and Ezel Kural Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*, vol. II, *op.cit.*, p. 34.

[4] See Dimitris Michalopoulos, « Moscow, the Third Rome », *International Journal of Russian Studies* (Ankara), issue No 3 (2009/1).

[5] Carl, Prince Royal de Suède, *Je me souviens... Souvenirs d'une longue vie*. Traduits du suédois par Étienne Avenard (Bruxelles: La renaissance du livre, 1936), p. 32.

[6] Treaty of Guarantee, article 3: *In the event of any breach of the provisions of the present Treaty, Greece, the United Kingdom, and Turkey undertake to consult together, with a view to making representations, or taking the necessary steps to ensure observance of those provisions. In so far as common or concerted action may prove impossible, each of the three guaranteeing Powers reserves the right to take action with the sole aim of re-establishing the state of affairs established by the present Treaty.* (Cyprus 1959 [London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1961], pp. 114-115.

[7] See, for instance, the famous book by Pierre Oberling, *The road to Bellapais*, New York: Social Science Monographs, Boulder. Distributed by Columbia University Press, 1982.

[8] Polybius, *Greece before the conference* (London: Methuen, 1919), p. 59: *On the other hand, it must not be forgotten that the islands that fringe the Asia Minor coast from the Dardanelles to Castellorizo, and which are almost exclusively Greek in population, belong geographically and commercially to the Asiatic mainland and should be included in the latter's population.*

[9] Hypourgheio Ethnikīs Paideias kai Thrīskeumatōn. Paidagogiko Institutouto (= Ministry of National Instruction and Cults. Paedagogical Institute), *Makedonia. Historia kai Politikī* (Macedonia. History and Politics), Athens: The House for the Publishing of School Manuals, 1992), 34. Cf. Evangelos Kofos, "National Heritage and National Identity in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Macedonia", in *Modern Greece: Nationalism and Nationality*. Edited by Martin Blinkhorn and Thanos Veremis (Athens: SAGE-ELIAMEP), pp. 128, 134. Constantinos Paparrhigopoulos, moreover, the –so to speak– "national historian" of Modern Greece regarded Ancient Macedonians as a people different from the Ancient Greeks (Hellenes). (Constantinos

Paparrighopoulos, *Historia tou hellīnikou ethnous apo tōn archaiotatōn chronōn mechri tōn kath'hīmas*, seventh book (Athens: Galaxias, 1969 [first edition: 1860-1874), pp. 34, 68.

^[10] Polybius, *Greece before the conference*, *op.cit.*, p.21: *It is true that Serbia annexed* [after the Second Balkan War] *a large portion of Northern and Central Macedonia (Uskub, Veles, Istip, Kotchana, Prilep, Ochrida, etc.)...*; cf. Giovanni Amadori-Virgilj, *La questione rumeliota (Macedonia, Vecchia Serbia, Albania, Epiro) e la politica italiana*, vol. I (Bitonto: Nicola Garofalo, 1908), pp. 232-233; Édouard Driault et Michel Lhéritier, *Histoire diplomatique de la Grèce de 1821 à nos jours*, tome V : *La Grèce et la Grande Guerre. De la Révolution turque au Traité de Lausanne (1908-1923)*, Paris : Les Presses Universitaires de France, 1926, p. 123; général Sarrail, *Mon commandement en Orient (1916-1918)*, Paris : Ernest Flammarion, 1920, p. 187ff.

^[11] The name of Justinian was initially *Upravda*, which was later translated into Latin: Justinianus. See Constantinos Paparrighopoulos, *Historia tou hellīnikou ethnous...*, *op.cit.*, ninth book (Athens: Galaxias, 1969), p. 94. The founder of the Justinian dynasty originated from the Skopje area. (Aikaterini Christophilopoulou, *Vyzantinī Historia* [= Byzantine History], I: 324-610 [Athens, 1975], p. 248.)

^[12] As a matter of fact, the British adopted an attitude friendly to the Greek Revolution in 1824, i.e. only after they were convinced that the Greek State to-be-created would be hostile to Russia. See Dim. Gr. Tsakonas, *Eisagogī eis ton Neon Hellīnismōn. Koinoniologia tīs politikīs kai pneumatikīs zōīs* (= An introduction to Modern Hellenism. Sociology of the political and intellectual life), Athens, 1973³, p. 46; Yannis Kordatos, *Hī koinōnikī sīmasia tīs hellīnikīs epanastaseōs tou 1821* (= The social meaning of the 1821 Greek Revolution), Athens, 1946, p.192. It is noteworthy that Yannis Kordatos, a historian, was the Marxist theoretician, while Dimitrios Gr. Tsakonas, a sociologist, was the theoretician of the 1967-1974 military regime.