

Does A Slav-Macedonian Minority Exist In Greece?

By Dr. Aristotle Tziampiris

Special to The National Herald

During the past few weeks the Prime Minister of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) sent a series of official letters to international organizations claiming the existence of an oppressed minority of his compatriots in Greece. Greek Prime Minister Costas Karamanlis (also a recipient of such a letter) vehemently rejected these accusations, denying the existence of such a minority.

To the American people and decision-makers these contradictory claims, emanating from the highest political levels, probably seem perplexing if not frustrating. After all, they are by no means obligated to be familiar with the complex and at times esoteric realities of modern Balkan history.

In order to understand the essence of this dispute (and why there is no Slav-Macedonian minority in Greece) one can turn to some useful parallels in American history, especially during the Revolutionary period.

The American Revolution constitutes a landmark historical event during which the majority of the colonists fought an ultimately victorious war, facing unfavorable odds against the era's greatest empire. However, historical scholarship has also established the fact that although most non-slave colonists shared the same ethnicity, language and religion, some rejected the revolutionary ideals and were thus referred to as Loyalists. Noted historians such as Joseph Ellis have even talked about a "civil

war" of sorts taking place, while ample documentation exists of pockets of Loyalist support in various places such as Manhattan and New Jersey. There are also examples of members of the same family who made different choices, as well as of opportunists and infamous "turncoats" (all schoolchildren in America being familiar with the case of Benedict Arnold). After George Washington's final military triumph, most Loyalist immigrated to places such as Canada and England. Possibly some remained in the newly independent state, but there can be no doubt that their descendants were sincere and loyal Americans.

Turning to the Balkans, it should be pointed out that during the 1940's a number of Slavophones (many of whom also spoke Greek) resided in Greece. The Nazi Occupation and subsequent Greek Civil War (1946-1949) presented options and necessitated choices among them. Many fought ferociously for their Hellenic national identity. A few collaborated with the Nazis. Others were lured by Tito who aimed to create a Balkan Communist Federation (controlled by him), that would include the Greek city of Thessaloniki and hence access to the Aegean Sea. Two military organizations for Slav-Macedonians were subsequently created (SNOF first and during the Civil War NOF) espousing a communist liberationist ideology.

The Greek Communist Party (KKE) somewhat opportunistically collaborated at different stages and in various degrees with both of

these organizations and in effect accepted in 1949 Tito's regional plans and the concomitant dismemberment of Greece (since the 1950's the KKE has condemned these actions). Not surprisingly, after the complete defeat of the Communist side the Slavophones supporting their cause fled Greece en masse together with KKE supporters and fighters.

It thus emerges that Slavophones in Greece, sharing the same ethnic, linguistic and religious characteristics split between those

There were also Nazi collaborationists, opportunists, intra-family divisions and "turncoats" within a framework of tragedy.

espousing Hellenism and a communist insurgency. There were also Nazi collaborationists, opportunists, intra-family divisions and "turncoats" within a framework of tragedy and war. To an American audience, in particular, it should come as no surprise that the Slavophones who remained in Greece, as well as their descendants, were nothing but loyal Greeks.

This analysis pointing to the non-existence of a Slav-Macedonian minority in Greece is also proved by the electoral fortunes of the Greek Rainbow Party. During the 1990's it contested a series of free and fair elections, aiming to exert pressure in order to secure rights for what it claimed to be an

oppressed Slavophone minority. In the June 1994 elections for the European Parliament, the Rainbow Party received 7,263 votes in the entire country representing an insignificant 0,1 per cent of the total.

In the 1996 general election it fielded common candidates with a party called the Organization for the Reconstruction of the Greek Communist Party (OAKKE) and received 3,485 votes (0,05 per cent of the total). In the June 1999 elections for the European Parliament, both the Rainbow Party and the OAKKE were represented, gaining 4,983 (0,078 per cent of the total) and 4,622 (0,072 per cent) respectively. (In the April 2000 general elections only OAKKE candidates stood for office, securing 1,122 votes and 0,02 per cent.) These election results for the Rainbow Party should be judged as disastrous but also instructive, since they point out to the apparent absence of the minority which it claimed to represent.

Based on the above, it can be concluded that no Slav-Macedonian minority exists in contemporary Greece. Nikola Gruevski may raise such an issue aiming at domestic partisan gains, but his nationalistic claims are not supported by facts or historical analysis; and it turns out that Americans, based on their own history, are uniquely positioned to understand the complex identity issues surrounding the Macedonian name dispute.

Dr. Aristotle Tziampiris is Assistant Professor of International Relations at the University of Piraeus.