

Evangelos Katsaras

The Question of Macedonia in the Negotiations leading to the Balkan League of 1912

The issue of the Balkan Alliance of 1912 is not an unknown one in international literature. The importance of the Balkan wars, with the results that it created, mainly solving the Eastern Question, led to a number of publications, both in Balkan and in Western literature.¹ However, the majority of the aforementioned literature has not dealt in depth with the issue of Macedonia, as interest was detected on political and diplomatic developments which led to the formation of the Balkan League and the outbreak of the First Balkan War. The aim of the present paper is to focus on the issue of Macedonia and how it was dealt by the Balkan allies, mainly through the study of the course of the negotiations and the original texts that were eventually signed. Reference is made to the Treaty of Alliance between Serbia and Bulgaria (March 1912) and between the latter and Greece (May 1912), at which the issue of Macedonia monopolized the talks and prolonged the negotiations.

¹ These publications include the work of Ivan Gešov, Bulgarian Prime Minister during the negotiations, entitled *The Balkan League*, and the biography of James Bourchier, correspondent in the Balkans for the *Times*, who played a leading role in the conclusion of the Greek-Bulgarian treaty. As for the issue of the Balkan League, the work of Ernst Helmreich, *The diplomacy of the Balkan Wars*, stands out and set an example for the later researchers. In Greek bibliography the most interesting work is that of Nikolaos Vlachos, *Ιστορία των κρατών της Χερσονήσου του Αίμου* (History of the States in the Balkan Peninsula). Valuable information based on archival material is to be found in the works of Andrew Rossos, *Russia and the Balkans*, and Edward Thaden, *Russia and the Balkan Alliance*.

The negotiations started shortly after the outbreak of the Italo-Turkish war in October 1911, between Serbia and Bulgaria in particular. Bulgaria's Ambassador in Rome Rizov² was sent to Belgrade to prepare the meeting of the Bulgarian Prime Minister Gešov with his Serbian counterpart Milovanović. At this meeting, held on September 28/October 11, 1911, even though there was consensus on the basic conditions that should govern the future agreement, there was a parallel divergence of opinions concerning the issue of Macedonia. The Serbian Prime Minister refrained from mentioning the asset Bulgarian request of independence for Macedonia, but instead set out the liberation of specific areas, without however specifying the division of them. The Serbian Prime Ministers views stood unchangeable even when Gešov pointed the reactions caused to neighboring countries by the attempt to annex Macedonia and Old Serbia. Although Milovanović agreed that the solution of autonomy would be better, he insisted on dividing the liberated soil, assuring that for some of them there would be no problem. So, the vilayet of Edirne had to be given to Bulgaria and Serbia respectively had to annex Old Serbia, North of the mountain range Šar. As for Macedonia, the Serbian Prime Minister agreed to cede the biggest part in Bulgaria, but demanded a portion of northern Macedonia, stressing that the best way to reach an agreement around the division issue would be to resort to the arbitration of the Russian Tsar.³

The debate was held in a very good atmosphere and ended with the commitment of both sides to continue the talks. Indeed, the first

² Dimitar Rizov, Bulgarian Ambassador at Cetinje (1903-1905), Belgrade (1905-1909) and Rome (1909-1915). Although a leading figure of the VMRO, maintained friendly relations with Serbs statesmen, which allowed him to take active part in the negotiations for the signing of the Treaty of Alliance. See *British Documents on the Origins of the War 1898-1914* (hereafter *B.D.*), London 1934, vol. 9, part II, p. 1102.

³ For the meeting of the two Prime Ministers see Ivan Gueshoff, *The Balkan League*, London 1915, pp. 15-17; Ernst Christian Helmreich, *The diplomacy of the Balkan Wars 1912-1913*, Massachusetts 1938, p. 48; Nikolaos Vlachos, *Ιστορία των κρατών της Χερσονήσου του Αίμου 1908-1914*, Athens 1954, vol. I, pp. 277-278; Edward Thaden, *Russia and the Balkan Alliance of 1912*, Pennsylvania 1965, pp. 75-76; and Andrew Rossos, *Russia and the Balkans 1909-1914*, Michigan 1978, pp. 80-82.

Serbian draft arrived in the Bulgarian capital in early November, but was deemed unacceptable by the Bulgarian leadership. The disagreement of the latter was mainly traced in the article 4 of the draft, which made no mention to the independence of Macedonia, but instead referred the case of the vilajets of Thessaloniki and Monastir to the arbitration of the Russian Tsar. The Serbian side came back, on October 25/November 7, with a new proposal, according to which Macedonia was divided into three zones: a non-controversial Serbian zone, a non-controversial Bulgarian zone and one controversial area subject to the arbitration of the Tsar. At the same time, however, the Serbs demanded to be awarded with the cities of Prilep, Kruševo and Struga. Gešov strongly protested about the proposed division and the systematic suppression of the term autonomy, turning personally to Milovanović, whom he tried to persuade to accept the above condition and to reduce Serbian territorial claims.⁴

The second phase of the negotiations was held in Paris, where Milovanović was on an official visit, and the Bulgarian side was represented by Rizov and the Bulgarian Ambassador at the French capital Stančov.⁵ The two ambassadors reiterated that Bulgaria was favoring the distribution of Macedonian territories only as a last resort and only if autonomy proved impractical or of short duration. At the same time, Bulgaria's intention was to apply the Russian arbitration only to the territories which constituted the greatest Bulgarian concessions. But the Serbs not only did they make no reference to the solution of autonomy, but instead favored the advanced distribution of the liberated soils, expanding at the same time the boundaries of the controversial area in parts of the Kosovo and Monastir vilajets.⁶

⁴ Gueshoff, *op.cit.*, pp. 19-23, where the full text of article 4; Helmreich, *op.cit.*, pp. 49-50; Vlachos, *op.cit.*, pp. 284-285; Thaden, *op.cit.*, pp. 79-80; Rossos, *op.cit.*, pp. 87-89.

⁵ It is worth noting that the two men, together with the Bulgarian Prime Minister, had developed in early October the conditions for the planned alliance with Serbia into a memorandum. See Gueshoff, *op.cit.*, pp. 13-14.

⁶ For their meetings with Milovanović the two diplomats, on November 7/20 1911, sent out a highly detailed memorandum to the Bulgarian Prime Minister.

The third phase of the negotiations lasted from late December 1911 till the signing of the Treaty and Russia took an active part during it. On December 15/28, the Serbian Ambassador in Sofia Spalajković submitted to the Bulgarian Prime Minister the revised Serbian plan, which accepted the Bulgarian stands for autonomy of Macedonia. With regard to the territorial issue, the new Serbian proposal incorporated the two zones –the Serbian and the controversial– into one, for the distribution of which the Russian Tsar would decide. Nevertheless, the new plan did not fully satisfy Bulgaria either. Although the leadership of the latter saw the acceptance of its terms for Macedonia and the controversial area with satisfaction, the Serbs, in exchange for the new concessions, were now pushing for the extension of the zone to the East and North, as well as part of the Ovče Polje. At this point Col. Romanovski, Russia's military attaché in the Bulgarian capital, intervened and proceeded to develop a territorial plan. This plan accepted the Serb positions on the eastern part of the controversial zone, but ceded the region of Struga to Bulgaria, which caused strong Serbian opposition. Despite Russian intervention and the pressure for immediate completion of the negotiations, the gap between the two sides seemed unbridgeable.⁷

Eventually, the Treaty of Alliance was signed on February 29/ March 13, 1912, but only after Russia proceeded to an oral declaration that Struga will be given to Bulgaria.⁸ After months of negotiations, the active participation of Russia and the risk of suspension because of the issue of Macedonia, the Treaty of Friendship and Alliance between the Kingdom of Serbia and the Kingdom of Bulgaria was now a fact, opening a new page in the history of the Balkan peninsula.⁹

For the full text see Gueshoff, *op.cit.*, pp. 24-33.

⁷ See Gueshoff, *op.cit.*, pp. 33-34; Helmreich, *op.cit.*, pp. 51-52; Vlachos, *op.cit.*, p. 285; Thaden, *op.cit.*, pp. 87-89; Rossos, *op.cit.*, pp. 92-94.

⁸ Thaden, *op.cit.*, pp. 92-93; Rossos, *op.cit.*, pp. 98-99.

⁹ For the Serbian original text of the treaty and the secret annex see Evangelos Katsaras, "The Serb-Bulgarian approaches in 1904 and 1912", *National History Conference* 26 (2005), pp. 256-261, pt. 28-40.

Article 2 of the secret Annex, specifying in detail the division of territories in the event of a successful conduct of the war, formed the backbone of the texts signed, as it was the main reason leading to the partnership and at the same time a cause of friction between the two States. According to the above article, Serbia reserved the area North and West of the mountain range Šar, while Bulgaria the area east of the Strymon and Rhodope. The most interesting part, however, was that concerning the intermediate region, for in the final text there was no explicit reference to the granting of autonomy to Macedonia, despite the fact that Bulgaria had put that term as a condition for signing the Treaty. Conversely, the final wording was characterized by vagueness and did not respond fully to the form promoted by the Bulgarian side already from the beginning of the negotiations.¹⁰ The fact that the Bulgarian leadership ultimately backed out and accepted that wording seems to indicate its intention to abandon the solution of autonomy and proceed to the division of the territories of Macedonia. The above assumption is reinforced by the Bulgarian attitude after the Paris talks (November 1911), when the main objective of Bulgarian leaders became limiting the Serbian claims.

The second part of the Balkan League was the Treaty of Alliance between Greece and Bulgaria that was signed in May 1912. The importance of this Treaty lies not only in the fact that it was a further step towards the declaration of the First Balkan War, but main-

¹⁰ The wording of the article was as follows: "Article 2. All territorial gains, which will be acquired by joint action within the meaning of Articles 1 and 2 of the Agreement and Article 1 of this Secret Annex, fall within the joint sovereignty (condominium) of both allies and their distribution will be executed directly and no later than three months after the restoration of peace under the following conditions: Serbia recognizes the right of Bulgaria to the territories east of the Rhodope and the river Strymon, Bulgaria (recognizing the right) of Serbia in the territories north and west of the mountain range Šar. Regarding the lands between the mountain range Šar, Rhodope, the Aegean Sea and Lake Ohrid, if both sides reap the belief that based on the general interests of the Serbian and Bulgarian nation, or from other external or internal causes, it is impossible to organize these lands in a separate autonomous region, with this in mind the lands will be distributed in accordance with the principles of the following declarations...".

ly in that both States have managed after long conflicts to cooperate against the common enemy. Regarding the problems that were encountered, which concerned the independence of Macedonia and the spheres of influence for each State, these were overcome quickly thanks mainly to Greek flexibility and the ‘tacit’ agreement of both Prime Ministers not to constitute a condition for the agreement and not to introduce them into the Treaty of Alliance.

At the beginning of October 1911 the Greek Ambassador to Sofia Panas approached the Bulgarian leadership asking the inclination of Bulgaria for the conclusion of an Alliance and its attitude in case of a Greek-Turkish war. Despite the favorable treatment of the Greek initiative on behalf of the Bulgarian side, the issue ultimately languished. Bulgaria’s desire to enter into an agreement with Serbia on one hand, the intense Russian pressure in this direction on the other, but also the fear of being driven to war due to the Cretan Question, forced the Bulgarian leadership to delay the talks with Greece until those with Serbia were concluded. Indeed, in early February 1912, after the normalization of the bulk of the serb-bulgarian disputes, the Bulgarian Prime Minister used the services of the *Times* correspondent in the Balkans James Bouchier to make his intention to accept the proposals that had been submitted by Panas known to the Greek Government and to discuss the possibility of signing a Treaty of Alliance. Bouchier immediately departed for Athens and at February 6/19, handed the message to Venizelos himself.¹¹

The Bulgarian proposal was deemed a good sign by the Greek side, the answer however was postponed until after the impending Greek elections. Indeed, on April 12/25 Panas received the draft of

¹¹ Gueshoff, *op.cit.*, pp. 37-38; Helmreich, *op.cit.*, pp. 74-75; Helen Gardikas-Katsiadakis, *Greece and the Balkan imbroglio*, Athens 1995, pp. 94-96. Bouchier himself notes in his diary: “February 6. Interview with Gešov at 11. I received a message for Venizelos. February 19. Athens. Venizelos, to whom I wrote on the 17th, suddenly appeared in my room at 10:30 am, having just received my letter. I arranged to meet him tonight. To Venizelos at 10. Together till 12. Transferred the message”. See Lady Grogan, *The life of J. D. Bouchier*, London 1926, p. 137. It is however surprising that Gešov, in his work, makes no reference to the role played by Bouchier.

the Treaty, which was handed to the Bulgarian Prime Minister two days later (April 14/27). The proposed Greek Treaty consisted of 4 articles and an attached Declaration. The articles provided for a secret triennial defensive alliance, for mutual military assistance in the case of infringement of sovereign territories or of the rights conferred by the treaties and, finally, to take joint action to defend the rights of the Greek and Bulgarian people living in Turkey. However, the Declaration was disengaging Bulgaria from any obligation in the case of Greek-Turkish war due to the admission of deputies from Crete to the Greek Parliament. In that case Bulgaria merely had to observe a friendly neutrality towards her ally.¹²

The Greek draft made no reference to the territorial issue, as the Greek Prime Minister thought that a possible introduction would delay the completion of the negotiations and could lead to definite break up. In fact, the Greek side interchanged the issue of autonomy with the Cretan, which had no intention of raising.¹³

Despite accepting its position on the Cretan question and the absence of any reference to the territorial issue, the Bulgarian government was not satisfied with the Greek draft. As for the second issue, its concealment suited the Bulgarian leadership, which in any case was not prepared to make any concessions in Macedonia. The belief on the weakness of the Greek army and the previous agreement with Serbia, in particular the separation of Macedonian territories, had created the impression in Bulgaria that after the end of the military operations they could impose their re-

¹² Nikolaos Vlachos, *Η συμμαχική προσέγγισης των τεσσάρων χριστιανικών κρατών της Χερσονήσου του Αίμου κατά το έτος 1912*, Thessaloniki 1953, pp. 22-23; the same, *History*, pp. 299-300. Gardikas-Katsiadakis, *op.cit.*, pp. 99-100. Both researchers refer to a document from Gryparis to Panas with date 7/20 April and Ref. No. 25. But this document does not contain the Greek draft, which was not found during the research of the author in the files of the Diplomatic and Historical Archives of the Hellenic Ministry of Foreign Affairs (hereafter AYE) related to the Greek-Bulgarian agreement.

¹³ The Greek decision to avoid any discussion concerning the territorial issue is clearly visible in the instructions sent to Panas, which reiterated the command not to introduce this issue in the talks. See AYE, lens. 88, no. 25, Gryparis to Panas, 7/20 April 1912.

quirements on the Greek government.¹⁴ Therefore, just like in the talks with Serbia, priority was given to the promotion of autonomy for Macedonia. The Greek draft, however, according to Gešov, not only did not make any reference to the autonomy of Macedonia, but neglected to mention even those privileges which were granted to the Christian provinces of European Turkey from various international treaties, and in particular article 23 of the Treaty of Berlin.¹⁵ This issue overshadowed the resuming of talks over the next month, as the two sides entered into interminable discussions trying to impose their position. Eventually, after mutual concessions and in front of the potential collapse of the negotiations, on May 17/30, 1912, at the Greek Embassy in Sofia the Treaty of Alliance and the attached Declaration were signed.¹⁶

The Treaty of Alliance between Bulgaria and Greece was essentially a memorandum of friendship, a political act that committed the two States to help each other in case of enemy sneaking, but also to contribute through diplomatic channels to the improvement of the position of their enslaved compatriots. The main objective of the Contracting Parties was to demonstrate to the Ottoman Empire and to the Great Powers the need to implement international treaties that promote the introduction of reforms in the European provinces of the Empire. With regard to Macedonia, and more generally on the territorial issue, the Treaty did not absolutely mention, the omission of this issue being a conscious decision of the two Prime Ministers in order to avoid obstacles and delays.

¹⁴ Rossos, *op.cit.*, pp. 113-114.

¹⁵ Article 23 refers to the implementation of the Organic Rules of 1868 both in Crete and in the provinces of European Turkey, with adjustments to suit local needs. See *Documents Diplomatiques, Affaires d'Orient. Congrès de Berlin*, Paris 1878, pp. 283-284.

¹⁶ See Gueshoff, *op.cit.*, pp. 38-40; Helmreich, *op.cit.*, pp. 75-76; Rossos, *op.cit.*, pp. 115-117; Gardikas-Katsiadakis, *op.cit.*, pp. 100-101. For the French original text of the Treaty and the annexed Declaration see Ivan Guéchoff, *L'Alliance Balkanique*, Paris 1915, pp. 223-228. *B.D.*, vol 9, part II, no. 274, Elliot to Edward Grey, 1 December 1913, pp. 1015-1016. Note that the original text of the Greek-Bulgarian alliance is not contained in the relevant files of the Historical Archives.

At this point it is worth noting the observation of Gešov that, due to lack of time, no agreement was reached concerning the border in Macedonia.¹⁷ However, this is not true. The reluctance of the two Prime Ministers to put the chronic problems on the table, particularly the territorial one, forced the two sides to sign a text that included just promises of friendship and mitigation of the hostile climate that had been created by the perennial controversy. Unlike the Serb-Bulgarian Treaty, which set out the borders in detail after a successful war, a possible raising of this issue in the Greek-Bulgarian talks would have destroyed the progress that had preceded them.

The beginning of the First Balkan War in October 1912, with the enthusiasm and expectations that engendered within the Balkan States, maintained the seemingly united front of the four allies and nothing hinted at the whirlwind that was intended to conjure. The decision of the allies not to reach a definitive agreement on the thorny issue of Macedonia and define spheres of influence, showing unique political maturity, a virtue that facilitated the achievement of agreements, overall and in the long run proved to be extremely damaging. The opportunistic Springs, which are implicit in the texts signed, surfaced shortly after the removal of the link that brought together the four States, namely the Ottoman Empire. The lack of a multilateral Alliance that would put on the table the above issues ensured the privacy of the conversations, but at the same time cultivated suspicion among the Balkan States and bred the interbalkan tension, which was even more intense this time due to the new status. The result, as very aptly pointed out by the late Professor John Papadrianos, was to put the Macedonian Question back on the table in 1913 and to contribute to the dissolution of the Balkan Alliance, which was achieved with much trouble in the previous year.¹⁸

¹⁷ Gueshoff, *op.cit.*, p. 40.

¹⁸ See John Papadrianos, «Το Μακεδόνικο Ζήτημα κατά τις σερβοβουλγαρικές διαπραγματεύσεις στα 1911-1912 για τη σύναψη συνθήκης συμμαχίας», *Μακεδονικά* 30 (1996), p. 325.

