NATO and the Kosovo War.
The 1999 Military Intervention from a Comparative Perspective

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United against "The Horsemen of the Apocalypse" and "The Chessmen of the Devil". The Greek–Serbian Friendship during the 1999 NATO Intervention in Yugoslavia

https://doi.org/10.1515/soeu-2021-0029

Abstract: The notion of a Greek–Serbian friendship as a traditional bond evolved in the public discourse of both Greece and Serbia during the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s. Based on alleged commonalities, feelings of threat and experiences of marginalisation, the sentiment of a special kind of solidarity and proximity between the two nations gained traction, especially in Greece. This holds particularly true during the 1999 NATO intervention in Yugoslavia. The Greek public vehemently opposed the bombing, which was interpreted as an unjustified war against the Serbian people. Both Greece and Serbia were perceived as "underdogs" in the "machinations of the Great Powers". The article investigates the phenomenon of Greek–Serbian friendship against the background of the 1999 NATO intervention, focussing particularly on the strong anti-Western sentiments that mobilised the Greek public at the end of the 1990s.

Keywords: Greece, Serbia, NATO intervention 1999, anti-Westernism, international friendship

The Making of a Hero

At a ceremony on 23 January 2018 in Belgrade, the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church Irinej awarded Marinos Ritsoudis, former officer of the Greek Navy, and Arnaud Gouillon, founder of the charity organisation *Solidarité Kosovo*, with the highest decorations. Ritsoudis received the Order of the Holy Emperor

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Constantine "for his sacrificial love towards the brotherly Serbian people, refusing to participate in the NATO bombardment of Serbia in 1999", while Gouillon was awarded the Order of St. Sava for his merits in the field of humanitarian aid to Serbs in Kosovo (Patrijarh odlikovao, *RTS*, 23 January 2018; Visoka crkvena priznanja, Srpska pravoslavna crkva, 28 January 2018).[1] The event was covered extensively in the Serbian media with the story of Ritsoudis in particular making headlines (Za ljubav, *Telegraf*, 23 January 2018; Patrijarh, *Danas*, 23 January 2018).

This story is as follows: On 18 April 1999, second naval lieutenant Ritsoudis refused to board the Greek destroyer ship *Themistocles* which was ready to set to sea in order to patrol the Adriatic as part of the NATO intervention against Yugoslavia. He was arrested and appeared before the naval court on 21 April 1999, which imposed a 2.5-year suspended prison sentence with a 3-year period of probation for failure to obey a military order. Before the court he claimed conscientious objection stating that "as an Orthodox I cannot participate in an attack against a brotherly people" (Serbian Orthodox Church, *Orthodox Christianity*, 26 January 2018; Visoka crkvena priznanja, *Srpska pravoslavna crkva*, 23 January 2018). The crowd that had gathered outside the courthouse cheered him as he left the building and there were scuffles with security officers, while Greek television stations reported on the conviction (Marinos Ritsoudis (1), (2), (3), *YouTube*, April 1999). Ritsoudis was dismissed from the Navy and subsequently lodged an unsuccessful appeal with the European Court of Human Rights. One month after being conferred his decoration by the Serbian Orthodox Church in 2018, the very same words Ritsoudis uttered before the naval court in 1999 appeared on a mural in downtown Belgrade together with his portrait, which was displayed in front of the Serbian and Greek flags. The graffiti was initiated by the Citizens' Party of Greeks in Serbia (*Građanska stranka Grka Srbije*) to honour Marinos Ritsoudis as a "hero of our time" and the mural was donated to "all Belgraders" (Počast za heroja, *Kurir*, 21 February 2018).

The heroisation of Ritsoudis is indicative of Greek–Serbian relations during the NATO intervention against Yugoslavia in 1999 and how it is remembered today. Greece is an exceptional case in this context: In contrast to the vast majority of NATO members, both the government and the opposition denounced the air strikes against Yugoslavia. What is more, according to opinion polls, between 92 and 97% of the Greek population condemned the intervention and remained strongly negative towards it during the campaign (Armakolas and Karabairis 2012, 95; Tsakona 2005, 2). However, the Greek government under prime minister Konstantinos Simitis refrained from vetoing the NATO decision, giving its consent on the condition that no Greek troops would participate in any enforcement operation. As a result, the intervention became a balancing act between the Greek

1 All translations are by the author, unless otherwise indicated.

government's obligations towards the Western allies and their need to take heed of public opinion in Greece (Armakolas and Karabairis 2012, 98).

Based on an analysis of Greek and Serbian media, this article investigates the phenomenon of the Greek–Serbian friendship against the background of the NATO intervention. The notion of a special relationship between Greeks and Serbs evolved during the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s in the form of a discourse and a set of everyday practices, resulting in the creation of an "imagined community of underdogs" (Fotiadis 2021, 32; for a review of the existing research, see Fotiadis 2021, 12–31). The air strikes against Yugoslavia in 1999 provoked not only strong pro-Serb and anti-NATO reactions among the Greek public, but also resulted in the development of a decisive anti-Western sentiment that narrowed the left–right divide in the ideological spectrum by encompassing Orthodox Christian anti-Westernism and Cold War anti-Americanism (Tsatsanis 2011). In order to better grasp these processes that unfolded in Greek society during the 1999 campaign, it is necessary to interpret them in the context of the Greek–Serbian friendship.

Traditional Friends and Orthodox Brothers

It was in June 1993—Sarajevo had been under siege for more than a year—that Radovan Karadžić travelled to Athens on the invitation of the Greek Orthodox Church. The leader of the Bosnian Serbs, at the time an outcast in Western Europe, was welcomed with "warm smiles, handshakes with foreigners, flowers and peace during time-off from his worries" the Athens-based newspaper *Eleftherotypia* noted (Adam 1993). To a huge audience, including prominent political dignitaries and clerics, Karadžić made a statement that gained prominence over the course of time: "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!" (Echoume mazi, *Eleftherotypia*, 15 June 1993; Michas 2002, 22; Fotiadis 2021, 174)—*nota bene* in the Peace and Friendship Stadium of Piraeus.

The Bosnian Serb leader's visit to Greece vividly depicts the notion of a Greek–Serbian friendship as a traditional bond connecting the two nations. In the context of this discourse, historical and cultural characteristics, such as the shared Orthodox faith and Byzantine heritage, the pioneering role in the uprisings against the Ottomans and co-belligerence in different wars, were emphasised as elements of a special kind of solidarity and proximity between Greeks and Serbs. This perception gained wide support in both countries during the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, but it had a particularly strong impact on the Greek public and media (Fotiadis 2021, 30–1). The huge amount of humanitarian aid that was collected mainly for Serbian war victims, the negative images of Bosnian Muslims and Croats

in the media, and the many pro-Serb rallies throughout Greece are ample evidence of the mobilising force of the Greek–Serbian friendship. Moreover, the controversial foreign policy pursued by Greek governments, their harsh stance towards neighboring Macedonia and close association with Serbian president Slobodan Milošević and with Radovan Karadžić, in addition to the Serb-friendly public, alienated Greece from its Western allies and contributed to the international isolation of the country in the first half of the decade (Kontonis 2003; Rozakis 1994; Valnten 2003).

Friendship and Greek–Serbian Relations

Asked to comment on the Greek–Serbian friendship in an interview with the Bosnian weekly *Dani* in 2002, Zoran Mutić, one of the most prominent translators of Greek literature in the former Yugoslavia, replied:

> I was defending the Bosnian position in the Greek media. This means that I was destroying this mendacious myth, which primarily has implications for everyday politics. In my opinion, friendship is an exclusively individual category, much like love. The Greek rightists supported Milošević because of Orthodoxy, the Greek leftists did so because they believed he was fighting world imperialism. Other than that, the average Greek has barely even heard of one or two Serbian football players. And this myth, which was constructed out of nothing, has already had its political heyday and is now past its best before date. (Stojić 2002)

While I essentially agree with Mutić about the limited knowledge of Serbia among the Greek public, it is worthwhile reassessing whether this "mendacious myth" was really "constructed out of nothing" and was already past its expiration date, given the popularity that the notion of friendship gained during the 1990s and still enjoys today, albeit to a lesser extent. What is more, the assertion that friendship constitutes an "exclusively individual category" ties in with a much broader scholarly debate about friendship in the study of international relations. As a rhetorical device, friendship has always been part of the language of foreign affairs and international treaties, signifying amicable agreement and mutual understanding, but has also been associated with political corruption and clientelism (Smith 2014). In recent years however, the concept of using friendship as an analytical category instead of merely as a metaphor has gained momentum in the field of international relations (Oelsner and Koschut 2014). According to these studies, international friendship designates "primarily a bilateral relationship in which both sides recognize each other as friends and are connected by a cognitive, normative, and emotional bond formed out of overlapping biographical narratives and focused on a shared idea of international order" (Berenskoetter and van Hoef

2017, 2–3). As such, it conveys a certain sense of belonging, a "special energy that emerges in the public sphere" (Elvert 2005, 191), an allegiance that actors shape and maintain through their interaction. In contrast to mere alliances, which primarily rest on strategic considerations, international friendships are symbolically and affectively charged by defining moments that are ritualised and integrated into the national narratives of both sides. As a result, the actors create a shared space of communication in which they narrate their history, interpret the present and anticipate the future (Berenskoetter and van Hoef 2017, 4–5; Smith 2014, 47). However, international friendship is a dynamic relationship oscillating as between proximity and distance, and subjected to change over time. It is adjusted according to current developments and can even be denounced—to use Mutić's expression: it does come with a sell-by date.

The notion of friendship has accompanied Greek–Serbian relations at least since the 1860s, when it evolved in the Greek political discourse as the idea of an alliance against the Ottomans and, in the aftermath, was treasured as symbolic capital. But as Greek historian Vasilis Gounaris points out,

> […] when we deal with this 'friendship', we refer to an ideology totally constructed by Greek politicians, academics, and journalists—a new breed—not by masses who had never had direct contact with the Serbs. […] Everybody knew that there was not much substance in this tradition—from time to time it was admitted openly—nor direct contact between the two peoples were particularly brisk. But unlike other Balkan peoples, Serbs retained if not the love at least the sympathy of the Greeks beyond the point when other nations in the region started to lose it irrevocably. (Gounaris 2004, 21)

On the other hand, in her study on stereotypes of Serbian intellectuals in the 19th and 20th centuries, Olivera Milosavljević draws the conclusion that

> in contrast to the terms 'Mother Russia' *(Majka Rusija)* and 'Brothers Russians' (*Braća Rusi*), which have been known for at least 100 years, 'Brothers Greeks' (*Braća Grci*) is a completely new product of the current media with no foundations in the past. In fact, the Greeks had a very bad reputation in the 'characterology' of Serbian intellectuals, sometimes even worse than the Bulgarians, and the fact that they, too, were Orthodox did not change a thing. (Milosavljević 2002, 279–80)

This negative image continued to dominate the Serbian as well as the Yugoslav public discourse and was exacerbated by the "Macedonian question" time and again (Pavićević 2004). Relations between Athens and Belgrade hit rock bottom in the late 1980s as activists from Yugoslav Macedonia and northern Greece became increasingly vociferous demanding that Greece should recognise a Slav-Macedonian minority as well as compensate Slav-Macedonian refugees of the Greek Civil War (1946–49) for the loss of property and allow them to return to the

country (Brown 2003; Danforth 1995). However, with the end of the Cold War and the break-up of the Yugoslav federation, Greek–Serbian relations not only saw a massive upturn, but also the emergence of a special kind of solidarity and proximity that gained increasing support among the Greek and Serbian public as the Yugoslav Wars proceeded (Fotiadis 2021, 84–90).

The Greek–Serbian friendship developed in a period of severe sociopolitical and economic crisis in both countries. Serbia was witnessing the violent break-up of the Yugoslav federation, war and international isolation, while Greece was shattered by a heavy economic crisis, the petty wrangling of political parties and the Macedonia name dispute (Skordos 2012; Tziampiris 2000). In this context, friendship ceased to be a mere label and instead became an everyday practice. It did indeed "reach the hearts of the people" (Karakatsanis 2013, 2014) through friendship associations, humanitarian aid initiatives, town twinning projects, solidarity concerts and other events. The notion of a traditional friendship provided a common narrative structure for making sense of the changing political conditions and tremendous challenges that Greek and Serbian societies were facing—all the more since it fell on the fertile ground that had been cultivated since the 1980s with the rise of ethnonationalism sponsored by Slobodan Milošević in Serbia and the proliferation of an antagonistic, ethnocentric and anti-Western discourse led by Andreas Papandreou in Greece (for a comparative perspective, see Keridis 1998; on ethnonationalism in Serbia, see Bieber 2005; Bremer, Popov, and Stobbe 1998; on populism and political culture in Greece, see Allison and Nicolaïdis 1996; Clogg 1993; Featherstone 2005). In the context of political collapse, regional turmoil and rising nationalism, finding a friend and defining common enemies promised to offer stability in unstable times.

Geometries of War – Islamic Archs and Orthodox Axes

In the Greek–Serbian case, "overlapping biographical narratives" could develop particularly well, since both the Greek and the Serbian national discourse evolves around the very same motifs of sacrifice, battle and betrayal (Brown and Theodossopoulos 2003; Sutton 1998). According to this common plot, Greeks and Serbs have always been pawns in the hands of "Great Powers" and victims of "Turkish/Muslim" and "Western/American" rapacity. Hence, "foreign conspiracies" and "power politics" were responsible for the violent separation of Cyprus as well as Yugoslavia. Both the Greek Civil War and the Yugoslav wars were seen as "fratricidal wars" which escalated due to international intervention. But in contrast to

Bosnian Muslims and Catholic Croats, as Orthodox brethren, Serbs did not receive any support. Time and again, the Serbian people fell prey to the "Turks" and the "West", just as had happened to the Greeks. Contrary to the Western media's crusade against them, the Serbs did not wage a war of aggression, but struggled against the "imperialistic policies" of "foreign powers" and their local allies, as they and the Greeks have done throughout history. Following this narrative of "eternal" conflict, both Serbs and Greeks became members of an "imagined community of underdogs" (Fotiadis 2021, 32; with reference to the "imagined communities" of Anderson 1991 and the "underdog syndrome" of Diamandouros 1994), fighting virtually the whole world, which had conspired against them. The Yugoslav wars of the 1990s were thus about facing common historical enemies, settling old debts and resisting subjugation by far stronger powers (Sutton 1998, 149).

Greeks and Serbs identified with each other through analogies that were embedded in their national master narratives and that allowed them to shape a story of friendship in response to the loss of certainty they encountered in the 1990s. This was reinforced by the Greeks' sense of being a "brotherless people" (*ethnos anadelfon*) threatened by its northern (Slavic/Bulgarian) and eastern (Ottoman/Turkish) neighbours, which has been part of Greek political culture since the formation of the modern nation (Gounaris 2007, 421; Irakleidis 2001, 68–9, 78–9; Zelepos 2002, 141–2). In these new circumstances, this Greek "brotherlessness" was on a par with the Serbian loss of "brotherhood and unity" (*bratstvo i jedinstvo*) with the other Yugoslav nations. Triggered by a siege mentality and horrific scenarios, the most prominent of which was the idea of an Islamic arch in the Balkans, stretching from Bosnia, Albania, Kosovo, parts of northern Macedonia and Bulgaria up to Turkey, the Greek–Serbian bond grew stronger, especially against the background of the escalating conflict in Bosnia. It was indeed the Bosnian War that became a "defining moment", symbolically and affectively charging the Greek–Serbian friendship. Hence, the Greek media almost exclusively portrayed the Bosnian Serbs as victims defending themselves, and praised Radovan Karadžić as a fighter for the Orthodox brethren in the Balkans—his visit to Athens in June 1993 is an impressive illustration of this. Greek newspapers and television stations glorified the Greek volunteers who fought in the ranks of the Army of Republika Srpska and took part in the fall of Srebrenica in July 1995, giving the impression that Greeks and Serbs were defending the "Orthodox axis" against the "Muslims" and the "West" on the battlefields of Bosnia (Michas 2002, 17; Ypsosan, *Ethnos*, 13 July 1995; on Greek volunteers in Bosnia, see Fotiadis 2021, 231–5; Karčić 2008).

After the end of the war and Papandreou's withdrawal due to illness in 1996, the Greek government under Simitis recalibrated Balkan policy towards détente.

But the Kosovo War and the NATO intervention in 1999 were set to become the next "defining moment" of Greek–Serbian friendship. The sentiment that the Serbs had fallen victim to "Western imperialism" gained dominance among the Greek public again. Negative images of the West that have been circulating in the Greek Orthodox Church for many years (Lis 2014; Makrides 2014; on the Russian case Mitrofanova 2005), and anti-American stereotypes stemming from the Greek Civil War and the Cyprus question (Stefanidis 2007), merged in a populist notion that mobilised broad swathes of Greek society, from right-wing Orthodox nationalists to far-left communists.

These phenomena reflect what Berenskoetter and van Hoef call the "less benign side of [international] friendship" that "is often overlooked" (2017, 7). The exclusive space of shared perceptions and mutual affirmation that friends create can in fact lead to ignorance of criticism from outside, discrimination and even violence against third parties, stemming from "a sense of collective self-sufficiency and self-righteousness" (Berenskoetter and van Hoef 2017, 7). Moreover, the negative othering that is promoted by this "downside" (Berenskoetter and van Hoef 2017, 7) of international friendship can be linked to research findings on group-building processes and the phenomenon of scapegoating, according to which it is much easier to define a group externally through demarcation from an outside party than internally, based on commonalities within the group (Petersson 2003, 91). The relationship that large parts of the Greek and Serbian public entered into with the outbreak of the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s was based on a shared perception of how the world works. It was imagined as a common struggle against recurring enemies in an unfriendly environment. In this setting, the special support and exclusive solidarity that the friends offered each other only enhanced exclusionary and discriminatory practices and made the two countries incapable of accepting criticism from outside. The outcome was self-isolation in the international arena, the distortion of information and ultimately the legitimation of violence, as the case of the Greek–Serbian friendship during the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo dramatically shows.

Serbian Victims, Albanian Separatists and NATO Atrocities

Greek media coverage of the Kosovo War and the NATO intervention followed the basic discursive structure that had already been in place during the Bosnian War —"a powerful enemy, innocent victims and the need for resistance" (Lialiouti 2011, 130). According to this narrative, the Serbs were victims and the Albanians were

separatists, not fleeing from the Serbian soldiers but from the bombs being dropped by NATO, which in turn was waging an imperialist campaign against the Serbs who were only fighting for their freedom (this in fact resembles the narratives in Serbia and China, see Satjukow, Jovanović and Zhou in this issue). The intervention was condemned because of the lack of a United Nations (UN) mandate. But what was even more decisive was that the bombing was judged as Western interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state in order to realise imperialist goals in the Balkan region under the pretext of humanitarianism (Auernheimer 2001; Dalis 1999; Giallouridis and Kefala 2001; Katsioulis 2002; Kondopoulou 2002; Panagiotarea 2000). Even though any military action was rejected, the Milošević regime was barely criticised and the suffering of the Albanian population scarcely acknowledged. Many Greek journalists tried to uncover "Great Power machinations" (Brown and Theodossopoulos 2003, 322) and "behave[d] like soldiers on the front" (according to the prominent Greek journalist Richardos Someritis, cited by Hadjidimos 1998–99, 7), while Greek TV stations often used video material taken from Yugoslav state television and furnished with lurid teasers on the "NATO atrocities" (Kondopoulou 2002, 4). The coverage of the NATO intervention unfolded within the context of an already heated public discourse. The opening of the media sector to private entrepreneurs since the end of the 1980s had led to a tabloidisation of Greek news media, which leaned towards sensationalism and populism. Foreign policy issues such as the Macedonia name dispute, the Bosnian War and the Greek–Turkish conflict over the rocky island of Imia that occupied the media during the 1990s, were blown up into "questions of national importance" (*ethnika themata*), rife with conspiracy theories and accompanied by descriptions of horrific scenarios (Demertzis, Papathanassopoulos, and Armenakis 1999; Frangonikolopoulos 2007; Pesmazoglou 1993). Moreover, the Serbian–Albanian conflict was linked to domestic policy and the issue of minorities. On the one hand, the demands of the Albanians in Kosovo were rejected, a decision that was justified with reference to the difficult situation of the Greek-speaking minority in Albania. On the other hand, fears that the Kosovo War could serve as a precedent for the Muslim minority in Western Thrace were stirred up (Kondopoulou 2002, 7). The escalation of the conflict in Kosovo thus served as a spectre with which to portray minority protection and heterogeneity as a threat to state sovereignty, at a time when members of minorities were becoming increasingly vocal in demanding their rights in the Greek public sphere and Greece was becoming a country of immigration.

United Against the New World Order

On the evening of 26 April 1999, the renowned Greek composer and key voice against the Greek Junta that had led Greece from 1967 to 1974, Mikis Theodorakis,

conducted a solidarity concert in Athens for the victims of the NATO intervention. Several thousand people gathered on Syntagma Square, listening to his resistance songs, which were interpreted by popular Greek singers. As to be expected, the audience waved the flags of Greece and Yugoslavia, but at the same time, other quite surprising combinations of symbols could be seen—the Byzantine double-headed eagle next to the communist red flag, icons of Christ together with the flag of the Kurdistan Workers' Party. In his speech to this mixed crowd, Theodorakis castigated the United States and its European allies for applying the "law of might is right" and using "heretical Yugoslavia" to set an example to all those who dared to oppose the West. The Greeks, however, could be proud of the fact that they were the only ones who rebelled against this "barbarism" and stood by the Serbs, whereas the majority of "Europeans" were "blind and deaf" (Mikis Theodorakis, Protiv bombardovanja, *YouTube*, 26 April 1999; Mikis Theodorakis, Synavlia, *YouTube*, 26 April 1999).

According to Lialiouti, "the main explanatory factor for the Greek attitude [during the Kosovo War] is the legacy of anti-Americanism combined with a leftist tradition in the country's political culture since 1974", whereas "the religious and pro-Serbian elements have been overestimated" (Lialiouti 2011, 127). In fact, anti-Americanism provided the crucial impetus for the protests against the NATO intervention in Yugoslavia and constituted the common denominator for different and opposing views in the Greek political spectrum. That said, the Greek–Serbian friendship also played an important role as a mobilising force, since it had already become a common point of reference for left-wing anti-Americanism and Orthodox anti-Westernism in Greek society during the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. The notion of a "Greek–Serbian community of underdogs" provided the narrative structure for an idiom that managed to unite the extreme right and the extreme left on an unprecedented scale in the context of the NATO intervention—a leftist critique of globalisation in the Greek national colours of blue and white with the blessing of the Orthodox Church (Tsatsanis 2011). Hence, the words with which the icon of the left Mikis Theodorakis and the archbishop of the Greek Orthodox Church Christodoulos addressed the international community and the West were mutually interchangeable without distortion of meaning. In their words, "the horsemen of the apocalypse" (Theodorakis) and "the chessmen of the devil" (Christodoulos) were trying to implement their "dark plans" in the region by means of air strikes (Katsioulis 2002, 127).

The wave of protests that gripped Greece during the NATO intervention was embedded in a practice of anti-American demonstrations that had developed in the 1970s and '80s (Lialiouti 2011, 34). It was institutionalised in the annual 17 November protest marches in memory of the bloody suppression of the student uprising at the Technical University of Athens (the *Polytechneio*) in 1973, which

hastened the downfall of the junta regime. The anti-NATO rallies in 1999 usually ended in front of the US embassy in Athens, the consulate in Thessaloniki or other American institutions, such as the Fulbright Foundation, and were accompanied by violence and attacks on the buildings. The protests took various forms, including wearing stylised targets, as many demonstrators did in Belgrade itself, but also swapping place-name signs to send NATO troop vehicles in the wrong direction (Katsioulis 2002, 132; Psaropoulos 1999). The violent demonstrations continued after the end of the air strikes. When US president Bill Clinton visited Athens just two days after the *Polytechneio* anniversary in November 2000, protest placards accused him of being a "fascist murderer" due to the NATO intervention in Yugoslavia, while the US flag was covered with swastika symbols and burned in public (Michas 2002, 77; Smith 1999; Beugel 2002, from minute 12:32). Furthermore, left-wing extremist groups, such as the Revolutionary Organisation 17 November (*Epanastatiki Organosi Dekati Evdomi Noemvri*, abbreviated to 17N), carried out numerous bomb attacks on state and international representatives, institutions and companies, resulting in several fatalities. In May 1999, for instance, there was a rocket attack on the residence of the German ambassador, and in June 2000 the British military attaché was shot dead in Athens (Anschlag, *Der Spiegel*, 17 May 1999; British Diplomat, *BBC News*, 8 June 2000). At the same time, representatives of the other extreme of the political spectrum were brought together in the neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn (*Chrysi Avgi*), which was registered in 1993, and right-wing networks were formed, such as Network 21 (*Dyktio 21*, alluding to the Greek uprising of 1821), founded in 1997 by influential politicians, intellectuals and industrialists (Vasilakis 1999; Skordos 2012, 396–7; on the phenomenon of the new right Mammone 2012).

The 1990s and early 2000s were thus a time of increased political confrontation in the Greek public sphere and witnessed the largest mass demonstrations so far. The Macedonia name dispute, pro-Serb rallies during the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo, and the conflict between the Orthodox Church and the state over the religious affiliation on identity cards saw thousands of Greeks take to the streets (Stavrakis 2005). The NATO intervention in 1999, however, was a special case, since it managed to narrow the divide between the two sides of the Greek political spectrum to an unprecedented extent: Left-wing anti-Americanism and right-wing anti-Western sentiments merged with nationalist scenarios of threat, populist conspiracy theories and fears of globalisation into a peculiar idiom of resistance to the "New World Order". This US foreign policy term, denoting a new age of global peace under American leadership after the end of the Cold War, became a catchphrase for those very fears of an imperialist Western advance into the Balkans that sought to destroy the region's cultural identity (Tsatsanis 2011, 17–23). As Brown and Theodossopoulos have shown in their comparative study of attitudes towards

the Kosovo War in Patras and Skopje, "Greeks of all social strata and political affiliations were, for once, in agreement":

> They meshed with discussions of shady arms manufacturers, politicians with hidden economic interests, American envy of Europe, and the presidential penis[2], to create a vision of international relations as a complex whole, driven by the forces of history, and scattering clues in its wake. (Brown and Theodossopoulos 2003, 326)

The formation of this "national-minded anti-globalisation bloc that cuts across the resilient left-right cleavage" (Tsatsanis 2011, 16) is strongly reminiscent of Zoran Mutić's assessment that the Greek right supported the Milošević regime on the basis of Orthodox affiliations, while the left saw it as a form of resistance to Western imperialism. What underlies this is the feeling of being marginalised, the perception of one's own irrelevance in the international arena and the "hermeneutics of suspicion" that shaped a new form of solidarity (Brown and Theodossopoulos 2003, 319). It is precisely this affinity that is at the heart of the Greek–Serbian friendship and that constitutes this "imagined community of underdogs".

"A Friend in Need Is a Friend Indeed"

With the beginning of the escalation in Kosovo in 1998, the Serbian media repeatedly emphasised the Greek government's rejection of any border changes in the region. On the occasion of the visits of foreign minister Theodoros Pangalos to Belgrade in March 1998 and February 1999, for example, the local newspapers ran headlines like "Greece against separatism" (Grčka, *Borba*, 7 March 1998; Milivojević 1999) and "Respect for the sovereignty and territorial unity of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia" (Poštovanje suvereniteta, *Borba*, 10 February 1999). Pangalos' assurance that Kosovo's independence was beyond question and that Athens would not be stationing any international troops was interpreted as support for the Belgrade regime. With the beginning of the air strikes, media coverage intensified: The press carried the news of anti-NATO protests and pro-Serb rallies in Greece to the Yugoslav public and reported extensively on humanitarian aid supplies from Greece (Potreban prestanak, *Politika*, 21 May 1999), on fundraising actions such as a travelling exhibition of frescoes from Serbian monasteries in Kosovo (Ilyenko 1999; Stvaralaštvom protiv bomba, *Borba*, 17 May 1999), and on visits of Greek delegations to the Yugoslav capital during the bombardment. According to one report, a delegation of members of the Panhellenic Socialist Movement

2 This is an allusion to the Lewinsky affair around US president Bill Clinton, which was occupying the international media at the time.

(*Panellinio Sosialistiko Kinima*, PASOK) promised, for instance, that they would educate the Greek public about the "dark machinations" of NATO upon their return (Agresor, *Politika*, 21 May 1999).

Greek journalists also covered the events in Yugoslavia on the ground during the intervention. On 8 April 1999, a special episode of the Greek current affairs television programme "Report without borders" (*Reportaz choris synora*) was broadcast from Belgrade, hosting Giorgos Dalaras. Earlier the same day, this well-known Greek singer had performed on the stage that was set up on Belgrade's central Republic Square. On this very stage, antiwar concerts as well as expressions of solidarity by prominent individuals had served as one of the strongest tools of the regime for the mobilisation of the Serb public (Satjukow 2020, 174–80). In his interview, Dalaras emphasised that he and his colleagues had travelled to Belgrade to send a sign of peace and not to support "a person or a regime". He condemned the air strikes as illegal under international law and positioned "this dirty war" in the globalisation-critical discourse of the "New World Order" (O Giorgos Dalaras, *Reportaz choris synora*, 8 April 1999; Pantelić 2015).[3] The day before, as another sign of support, a friendly match between the AEK Athens Football Club and Partizan Belgrade had taken place in the Yugoslav capital (Katsioulis 2002, 132). Greek correspondents in Yugoslavia reported about the "unbroken spirit of resistance of the Serbs" and the devastation caused by the bombs dropped by the Western military alliance—apparently leaving no space for the suffering of Albanians and the historical background of the conflict (Galanis 1999).

After the end of the air strikes and the Kosovo War, during their visits to Belgrade, delegations from Greece continued to convey the "unbroken solidarity" of the Greek public with the Serbs. As the mayor of Corfu, Chrysantos Sarlis, announced in an interview with the Belgrade daily *Politika* in September 2000: "The Greek people would have condemned us if we had not supported the Serbs" (Petrović 2000). The article stressed Sarlis' refusal to grant NATO permission to land ships and aircraft on the island, as well as the pro-Serb rallies on Corfu during the intervention. According to Sarlis, the West continued to exert pressure on Greece in order to shift public opinion towards Serbia, but Greek–Serbian relations were based on a "great and traditional friendship". Referring to the proverb "a friend in need is a friend indeed", he assured the Serbian people and president Milošević of the unwavering support of the Greeks—only a month before mass protest on the streets of Belgrade brought down the regime on 5 October 2000.

3 Dalaras also performed a solidarity concert with Goran Bregović in Aristotle Square in Thessaloniki during the NATO intervention. See the recording of the live television broadcast on *YouTube*, "Giorgos Dalaras, Goran Bregović: Nichta, Tis amynas ta paidia 1999."

"Our Own Miloševićs"

Very few journalists provided balanced coverage of the NATO intervention and voiced criticism of the biased reporting of the majority of Greek media. In the editorial of the May issue of the monthly *KLIK*, for instance, Fotis Georgeles explicitly called the Greek public to account. He used the case of Abdullah Öcalan, founding member of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, PKK), whose arrest by the Turkish secret service when leaving the Greek embassy in Kenya in February 1999 caused an outcry in the media and public, to demonstrate the "schizophrenia" (Georgeles 1999, 16) of Greek society. According to Georgeles, the leader of the PKK and his movement enjoyed the full sympathy of the Greeks, because the Kurds were allegedly waging a just struggle for their independence and liberation from Turkish oppression. The demands of the Albanians in Kosovo, on the other hand, were condemned as separatism and the NATO intervention as interference in the internal affairs of Yugoslavia:

> I don't understand this progressivism that always makes us allies of Saddam, Karadžić, Arkan, Öcalan, Milošević. Is it really possible that the whole world is constantly wrong except for us? I don't understand this unrelenting 'patriotism' that has sustained our tense relations with Albania, Skopje, Turkey, Bulgaria, all of Europe and America for so many years. Everyone is conspiring against us? No one else is ever right but us? (Georgeles 1999, 16)

Georgeles attributed this "unrelenting patriotism" to the Greek nation-building process, which, in a short time and under great pressure, attempted to embed a dualistic friend/foe pattern in the mindset of the people. Simultaneously, the ideology of this "young state of not even 170 years" did not tolerate diversity and variety:

> And maybe that's why we want so much to be Greek these days, because everything happened recently, because our grandmothers still spoke Arvanitika.[4] We are so hostile to everything that is different. We feel no sympathy for the Bosnians, for the Albanians […]. History has passed through our country at lightning speed. Within a few years we have risen to become one of the most developed countries in the world, Greece is the 20th richest country on Earth, but because we have experienced so much in such a short time, we have not been able to process it and we still live with the Balkan syndrome of underdevelopment. Delusions of grandeur and persecution mania all rolled into one. (Georgeles 1999, 16–7)

On the question of NATO intervention and the attitude of the Greek public, Georgeles addressed the readers with powerful words:

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4 Arvanitika is an Albanian dialect that is only very rarely spoken in Greece today.

> Are you going to tell me that people are dying here and that I'm dealing with 'patriots' instead of dealing with NATO? Yes, because step by step you are becoming a part of this absurdity. In Kosovo, it all started because they banned some books in Albanian; because our own 'Miloševićs' will eventually let the NATO bombers fly over our heads too. […] We are with Milošević. But as if we cannot condemn the bombing without reproducing Milošević propaganda. (Georgeles 1999, 16)[5]

In a letter to the Panhellenic Journalists' Association (*Panellinia Omospondia Enoseon Syntakton*, POESY) that was printed in the same issue, Christos Tellidis, correspondent of the publishing group *Ethnos* in Pristina and vice president of POESY, revealed precisely how this propaganda of the Belgrade regime functioned and how it had exposed the behaviour of many of his Greek colleagues during the NATO intervention (Tellidis 1999). After his return from Kosovo to Greece, he gave a detailed account of how Serbian paramilitaries and police detained and intimidated him and 80 other international reporters in a hotel in Pristina. While all the other journalists were united in their decision to boycott Serbian officials because of the media restrictions, it was only his Greek colleagues who continued to conduct interviews with Belgrade representatives and spread the regime's false reports. For example, one night, the Yugoslav army shelled Pristina and the very next day staged it as an attack by NATO, according to Tellidis. While Greek television stations circulated the fake news from Belgrade, Tellidis was able to see for himself how Serbian units expelled Albanians from the Kosovar capital at the time (see also Telloglou 1999). On another occasion, he and his colleague were chased by the Yugoslav secret service when they tried to speak with a journalist from the Albanian-language newspaper *Koha Ditore*. Lastly, as they left the country, Yugoslav officials confiscated all their material at the border. Tellidis' appeal to journalistic standards and professional ethics fell on deaf ears. The Panhellenic Journalists' Association did not feel the need to react.

The Greek–Serbian Friendship: Spectre and Prospect

In his interview in 2002, Zoran Mutić suggested that the "best before date" of the Greek–Serbian friendship "had already expired" (Stojić 2002). In a similar vein, the Belgrade weekly *Vreme* as well as various Greek commentators had already announced the end of the decade of "flirtation and mimicry" (Seizova 2000) between Greece and Serbia two years earlier, when foreign minister Georgios

5 For a detailed account of the discourse of simultaneously opposing Milošević and the NATO intervention, see Satjukow 2016.

Papandreou travelled to the Yugoslav capital shortly before the presidential elections of September 2000 in order to advocate "democratic and fair elections and openness to change" (Seizova 2000; see also Michas 2002, 102). In the end, it was only the mass rallies on the streets of Belgrade, as a consequence of electoral fraud, that brought about change.

In fact, from the mid-1990s, the Greek government under Simitis began to distance itself from Milošević's Serbia and pursue a more pragmatic foreign policy of rapprochement in the region and adherence to the Western alliance. It continued along these lines in the context of the NATO intervention against Yugoslavia in 1999 and fulfilled its obligations by opening ports, roads and fuel lines, patrolling the Adriatic, allocating the Aktion Airbase in Preveza for Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) flights and Thessaloniki as the main rest centre for NATO soldiers. Moreover, the Greek government played a key role in managing the influx of refugees and providing humanitarian aid during the Kosovo War (Armakolas and Karabairis 2012, 99–100). In doing so, it went against the overwhelming majority of the Greek public, which strongly condemned the intervention and showed particular solidarity with the Serbs, thus transcending the right-left cleavage in the Greek political spectrum.

Nowadays, the Greek–Serbian friendship might seem to have become a mere rhetorical phrase in the bilateral and diplomatic contact between Belgrade and Athens. On many other levels, however, this notion has developed into an everyday practice and lasting affinity: Be it the personal contacts of Greek families who hosted Serbian children during the war in their homes, or institutionalised forms such as Greek–Serbian town twinning, which continue to be established (on the hosting programme, see Blagojević 2010; Fotiadis 2021, 274–9; on Greek–Serbian town twinning, see Fotiadis 2020). In addition, Greece is the most popular holiday destination for Serbian tourists, and surveys in the past have repeatedly shown the highest degrees of mutual sympathy (Grčka i ove godine, *Blic*, 10 June 2015; Servia, *Kathimerini*, 9 October 2005; Sotirchou 2000). Likewise, a number of websites and internet forums are dedicated to the close relations between the two nations.

Against this background, to this day, friendship associations, political organisations and especially the Orthodox church in the two countries play an important role in fostering and commemorating the Greek–Serbian friendship. It remains to be seen to what extent the "less benign side" of the friendship, the discriminatory, exclusionary and violent attitudes towards others, will find their way into the culture of remembrance. As the case of Marinos Ritsoudis illustrates, the "defining moment" of Greek support for the Serbs in 1999 is currently on its way to becoming part of the discourse of remembrance regarding the NATO intervention in Serbia (Satjukow 2020, 215–85). Ritsoudis being awarded with the highest

decorations by the Serbian Orthodox Church in 2018 certainly contributed to this process by heroicising the Greek navy officer who refused "to participate in an attack against [the] brotherly [Serbian] people", thus reinforcing the us versus them thinking that was dominant during the 1990s. Besides the mural in downtown Belgrade, Ritsoudis has literally entered the public sphere in Serbia, when, only recently, a street in the city of Niš was named after him. The decision of the city council was met with broad approval, but nevertheless sparked debate (Todorović 2021). The point of contention, however, was not the fact that Ritsoudis is a living person, but the choice of the street—an unsightly, 50-m-long cul-de-sac with run-down buildings. According to the residents of the street and commentators, the "brave Greek" deserved much better for his heroic deeds—at least a proper street in the city centre, better still a boulevard instead of a back alley now named "ulica Marinosa Ricudisa", in the southern Serbian town of Niš (Kocić 2021).

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Bionote

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