

## Minority Rights and Educational Problems in Greek Interwar Macedonia: The Case of the Primer “Abecedar”

*Iakovos D. Michailidis*

### Abstract

This study elucidates the diplomatic context of the “Abecedar,” a Slavic primer prepared in 1925 by the Greek authorities for use by Greece's Slavic-speaking population. The “Abecedar” has become widely known recently because in various partisan studies its very existence and its withdrawal shortly after its circulation have been employed as sound evidence for the existence of an ethnic Macedonian minority in Greece even before World War II. Archival sources, used here for the first time, provide substantial evidence to show that the primer was a desperate and honest (at least for European observers) attempt by Greece to comply with its minority obligations and simultaneously to neutralize Bulgarian and Serbian involvement in Greek Macedonia. The attempt eventually failed owing to local pressure and diplomatic necessity.

The relatively mild period into which Greek-Bulgarian relations had entered after the Peace Treaty of Neuilly (1919) was suddenly interrupted in the autumn of 1924. On 29 September a protocol was signed at the League of Nations in Geneva by Nikolaos Politis and Christo Kalfov, the representatives of Greece and Bulgaria, respectively, concerning the “Protection of the Bulgarian Minority in Greece.” This agreement, which became known as the Politis-Kalfov Protocol (Tounda-Fergadi 1986), constituted the first official acknowledgment by Greece that a Bulgarian minority existed in Greek Macedonia. The protocol obliged Greece to secure fair treatment for all members of this minority according to the terms of the Treaty of Sèvres between Greece and its major allies in the first World War, signed on 10 August 1920 (Ypourgeion ton Exoterikon 1920:articles 2, 8 and 9).

Two members of the Mixed Commission for Greek-Bulgarian Emigration established in 1919, Colonel A. C. Corfe and Major Marcel de Roover, were assigned to observe the protocol's implementation. Article 2 of this document stipulated that these two officials were expected to determine, after a local survey, the minority's specific needs especially in matters of education and religion. Subsequently they would submit reports to the Greek government suggesting appropriate measures. It was emphasized that the Greek representative on this Mixed Commission was expected to assist the two officers in every possible way. Moreover, Article 3 of the protocol stated explicitly that Corfe and de Roover had the right to accept petitions by individuals or committees that thought their minority rights had been violated.

After the protocol was signed, Greece and the League of Nations engaged in a frenzy of intensive negotiations regarding the details of its implementation. On 25 November 1924 Athanasios Agnidis, desk-officer in the Section for Minorities of the League of Nations, addressed to Éric Drummond, the League's secretary general, a memorandum conveying the views of the Greek government as they had been expressed by Foreign Minister Georgios Roussos.<sup>1</sup> The Greek proposal focused on three points: (1) Bulgarian minority schools with more than forty students would be sponsored by the Greek state. If there were fewer than forty students, then it would be the community's task to support its school financially. Furthermore, it was compulsory for the teaching personnel to obtain Greek citizenship. (2) Exarchic priests (i.e., followers of the Bulgarian Independent Church known as the Exarchate) were obliged to obtain Greek citizenship. No bishops would be appointed to the Bulgarian minority, because, according to the rules of the Orthodox Church, the coexistence of two religious authorities of

---

<sup>1</sup> League of Nations. *Archives de la Société des Nations*, 1919-1946 (henceforth ASN), Section/Minorities, S.343, No. 5, “Memorandum pour le Secrétaire Général” by Agnidis, 25 November 1924.

the same dogma within the same bishopric is forbidden. In fact, Agnidis pointed out that the same rule had been applied in Bulgaria; all bishops appointed there by the Ecumenical Patriarch had been expelled since their authority had not been recognized by the Exarch. (3) A Minority Bureau reporting to the Greek Foreign Ministry should be established in Thessaloniki. This bureau would collect and evaluate all petitions concerning minority rights. It would investigate the cases and submit a report to the minister in charge, who was expected to settle each issue. The Greek government supported the view that the establishment of such a service was the best way not only to handle all minority matters but also to assist the League of Nations, which at that time was overwhelmed by numerous petitions and letters of grievance concerning the Bulgarian minority of Greece. An additional advantage that the Greek foreign minister pointed out was the clear and global view of the question that the League of Nations was expected to obtain in the form of a well-documented file, thanks to a service of this sort entirely dedicated to the implementation of the minority treaties.

In addition, Agnidis's memorandum stipulated that the two members of the Mixed Commission would definitely have to refrain from local investigations. It was argued that the presence of Corfe and de Roover in regions where the minority lived would not only cause justified complaints but would also encourage all those propagandists who felt obliged to overload the League of Nations with piles of repetitive and redundant protests. The memorandum adduced an additional disadvantage of local investigations: the Slavophones of Greek Macedonia lacked a sound national orientation. Among them were several with pro-Bulgarian leanings, but the presence of the Commission members and the collection of petitions might encourage non-Bulgarian Slavophones to join the minority group owing to its apparently preferential treatment. Such a development would then accelerate the flow of Bulgarian money into Macedonia for the establishment of additional Bulgarian schools. In any case, Greece was not prepared to give the impression that Greek Slavophones were neglected by the state while the Bulgarian minority enjoyed favorable treatment.

Greece obviously expected that these measures, especially the establishment of the Minority Bureau, would suffice to treat the minority question in the best possible way and in conformity with the minority treaties. On the other hand, it is clear that Greek officials were confused about the national preferences of Greece's Slavic-speaking inhabitants. Politis, for example, considered all Slavophones to be Bulgarians while his superior, the foreign minister, stated that only a few Slavophones aligned themselves with Bulgaria.

Three days later, on 28 November 1924, the secretary general of the League of Nations sent a letter to the minority section director, Eric Colban, to inform him about Agnidis's memorandum.<sup>2</sup> Drummond rejected Agnidis's proposal to channel all minority complaints to the League of Nations exclusively through the Thessaloniki Minority Bureau, arguing that this was against Article 2 and Article 3 of the protocol, signed only two months earlier, which in fact had provided for a League of Nations' service and not for a service by a branch office of the Greek Foreign Ministry. The secretary general closed his letter with a number of suggestions: (1) The Greek government would have to establish a Minority Bureau in Thessaloniki. (2) Attached to or within this office a separate service would have to be provided for Corfe and de Roover, to which all minority petitions, complaints, etc. would be addressed. (3) All these documents would then be forwarded, together with their Greek colleagues' remarks—if that was judged necessary—to the Mixed Commission. (4) It was only then that the Greek official could transmit these documents to the Minority Section of the League of Nations, which was expected to investigate the cases and take appropriate measures. (5) The Minority Section would have to report to Corfe and de Roover who, in turn, were expected to inform the League of Nations.

The following month, December 1924, was particularly busy for the negotiators representing Greece and the League of Nations. On 4 December Marcel de Roover dispatched a confidential report to Eric Colban to inform him of a conversation he had had with Roussos, the Greek foreign minister.<sup>3</sup> As far as religion was concerned, Roussos had insisted that the Bulgarian minority clergy obtain Greek citizenship. He had also broached for the first time the question of

---

<sup>2</sup> ASN, S.343, No. 5, Drummond to Colban, Geneva, 28 November 1924.

<sup>3</sup> ASN, S.343, No. 5, Marcel de Roover to Colban, Athens, 4 December 1924.

the language to be used in the minority schools. He maintained that the medium of instruction should be neither literary Bulgarian nor Serbian but Macedonian dialect.

A few days later, during the meeting of the Council of the League of Nations in Rome, negotiations took place between Greece and the League on the implementation of articles in the Politis-Kalfov Protocol concerning the Bulgarian minority. Eric Colban recorded the negotiation procedure in detail in his lengthy, confidential report under the title "Record of Various Conversations in Rome concerning the Execution of the Minorities Protocol of September 29, 1924 between the Greek Government and the League of Nations."<sup>4</sup>

On 14 December, Corfe and de Roover started to parley with Colban concerning the trouble the Greek government was experiencing because of the Geneva protocol. It was already clear that the Greek parliament was bound to refuse to ratify the protocol, while technical problems related to the minority schools and churches were not negligible either. Regarding the churches, Corfe and de Roover fully adopted the Greek view. They declared that it would suffice if the Bulgarian minority was permitted to have the holy liturgy in its language, adding that it was not necessary to put the minority under a foreign religious authority. Corfe observed that the League of Nations had faced a similar problem with the Lutheran Church in Poland. However, although Lutheran Germans had maintained for many years that they should continue to be administered from Berlin, action still had not been taken on that matter, the League's chief concern being the free exercise of religion by any minority and not necessarily the right of religious administrative autonomy. This was also the case in Greece. Slavophones should not be under the religious jurisdiction of the Bulgarian Exarchate. Eventually the League officials expressed their optimism regarding a final settlement of the issue of religious rights.

The question of the minority schools was the second one to be discussed. Colban noted that, according to the Minority Treaty of Sèvres, the language of the minority was meant to be its mother tongue, but he wondered what that really meant and which language that was. Then he attempted a linguistic approach. The Bulgarians of Greece spoke dialects slightly different from all the other Slavic languages. No newspaper or book had ever been written in these dialects. Therefore, a new literary language had to be standardized, based on these local dialects. Colban observed, however, that since such linguistic construction was against the terms of the minority treaty, Bulgaria would protest and would press for the use of literary Bulgarian instead. Although Bulgaria was not directly involved in the minority treaties that Greece had signed, he felt that its views should not be neglected even though its claims were not legitimate. De Roover also supported the view that the local dialect should be used since this option was expected to help the Greek government deal with any counterarguments during the forthcoming parliamentary debates. But Corfe reacted, feeling that such an option was too risky because "the creation of a Macedonian language might encourage the Macedonian movement not only in Greece but also in Bulgaria and Serbia." Nevertheless, he concluded that strict implementation of the minority treaties was absolutely necessary, which meant that employment of the local dialects was inevitable. Since the question was political, he would rather refrain from expressing a view before considering the problem more deeply.

Corfe also touched upon the issue of the minimum number of students required for the operation of a Bulgarian minority school. He said that he had already been informed by Greek officials that it was their intention to use the same norms employed in other countries. Colban argued, however, that since the situation of each minority varied from country to country, it would be unreasonable to fix too high a number as a prerequisite for the establishment of a minority school in Greek Macedonia.

On the following day, 15 December 1924, the same officials, joined by Paul Mantoux of the League's Minority Section, discussed the question anew, having already been informed about Greek domestic reactions. When the delicate issue of the minority school language was discussed, Colban was certain that Serbia, too, would not welcome the "transformation of the Macedonian dialect into a distinctive language." He met on the same day with the Bulgarian representative to the League of Nations, Vladimir Robev, who informed Colban about his government's interest in the implementation of the protocol and concentrated his arguments on

---

<sup>4</sup> ASN, S.343, No. 5.

the language problem. He maintained that the construction of an “artificial language” was absolutely ridiculous and certainly against the terms of the minority treaties, especially if those terms were analyzed in the light of the treaty specifying mutual Greek-Bulgarian emigration. In this treaty a Bulgarian minority in Greece had been mentioned explicitly. Any decision by the League that the elementary education of that minority was not to be in Bulgarian would be against the previous agreement. The dialects spoken varied from village to village but, according to Robev, “they were all Bulgarian dialects.”

Robev's argument hardly took anyone by surprise. Bulgaria's claim to the whole region of Macedonia—some Greek-speaking parts included—dated back to the 1870s. Its main justification was the allegedly Bulgarian ethnic origin of the Slavic-speakers living there. As one could easily have anticipated, Sofia was extremely reluctant to lose the unexpected privileges granted by the September 1924 protocol.

That very same day, 15 December 1924, Colban met with P. Metaxas, the Greek representative to the Emigration Commission. Among other things, Metaxas said that the Greek government would be glad to sanction the local dialects as the minority school language. Moreover, since those dialects lacked a literary form, Greece would prepare a primer and other textbooks. Colban said that he could not express a view about the legitimacy of such an initiative since the existing treaties were far from explicit regarding such matters. However, he stated to Metaxas the two most important political risks underlying such a procedure: (1) the provocation of a Macedonian movement following the creation of a distinct Macedonian language, (2) Bulgaria's consequent reaction. Metaxas replied that he fully appreciated those risks. Colban therefore suspected that the Greek minister perhaps did not share his government's determination to create “a more or less artificially constructed language.”

On the following evening, 16 December 1924, Colban and Metaxas discussed the protocol and related problems at even greater length. Colban reiterated that he could not express his own view on the language problem. He wondered whether even Serbia would want the creation of a Macedonian language and if it was advisable to complicate relations with Bulgaria in an attempt to appease Serbian anxiety. Regarding the minority schools, he suggested that the minimum number of pupils should be the same as in the Greek schools, rejecting Greek proposals to transplant the system employed for Lutheran Germans in Upper Silesia, Poland.

In less than three weeks, shortly after New Year's Eve, the protocol question surfaced anew. In early January 1925, Corfe met Colban.<sup>5</sup> Corfe informed his superintendent that, when he had met with Roussos, the Greek minister had outlined all the troubles related to the protocol and had revealed to him that it was going to be rejected by the Greek parliament. Corfe also touched on the school question. In his opinion, elementary education had to be in the local dialects even if those dialects lacked a literature. Colban repeated the views he had expressed to Metaxas in Rome and emphasized the probable diplomatic complications. Corfe replied that complications could be easily avoided if oral teaching were done in the dialect and books were written in Greek. But Colban disagreed because this measure was against the essence of the treaties—neither the teaching nor the books were meant to be in Greek. Whereas the Greek government and the League of Nations had almost reached an agreement on the issue of minority churches by the end of January 1925, officials and diplomats were still rather skeptical about the language question, although the local Slavic dialect was obviously preferable.

In Greece, meanwhile, the reaction against the Politis-Kalfov Protocol was peaking because public opinion stood fervently against the recognition of (or, rather, the creation of) a “Bulgarian” minority in the northern provinces (Tounda-Fergadi 1986:84-86). Various associations and communities joined in the protest. The following telegram dispatched jointly by refugees and natives of the village of Youmenissa in Central Macedonia was typical:

Natives and refugees from the region of Youmenissa protest the Geneva Protocol and demand its cancellation. The Protocol enhances the prospects for propaganda in Macedonia and Thrace and calls for foreign intervention in domestic affairs. . . . The Protocol is an insult to our national pride; it will complicate the settlement of the [Asia

---

<sup>5</sup> ASN, S.343, No. 5, Eric Colban, “Minute Sheet” submitted to the secretary general, 6 January 1925.

Minor] refugees and their brotherly coexistence with the natives. (*Efimeris ton Valkanion*, 7, 10, 25 January 1925)

Moreover, deputies from Macedonia protested strongly in parliament (Tounda-Fergadi 1986:106). At the same time, diplomatic relations with Serbia were aggravated, for Belgrade abrogated the 1913 Greek-Serbian Treaty of Alliance signed just before the second Balkan War. Eventually, on 2 February 1925, the Greek parliament voted against the protocol. Some time later, on 14 March 1925, the Council of the League of Nations released Greece from all of its obligations related to the protocol.

The cancellation of the protocol did not mean, however, that Greece was going to ignore its obligations toward the minorities as those obligations had been defined by the Treaty of Sèvres. The League of Nations was clear on this matter. Eric Drummond, the secretary general, submitted three questions to the Greek government regarding Slavic speakers in Greece: (1) What measures were taken by Greece after 29 September 1924 in order to implement the minority treaty it had signed on that day? (2) What measures would be taken in case Greece could not comply with the terms of the treaty? (3) What were the Greek views regarding the educational and religious needs of the Slavophones and what measures did the government intend to take to meet those needs? (Tounda-Fergadi 1986:136-138.)

At the end of March 1925, Colban met Vasilis Dendramis, the Greek chargé d'affaires in the League of Nations. Dendramis told Colban that his government intended to introduce, for the sake of the Slavophones, measures similar to those applied to Germans in Czechoslovakia and Poland. Colban disagreed, stressing that the cases were not exactly similar. It was hard for him to accept that forty applications would be required for the establishment of a minority school while in the same region a Greek school would be permitted to operate with fewer students. The principle had to be the same, he argued, for both majority and minority schools.<sup>6</sup>

Two months later, on 29 May 1925, Dendramis communicated the Greek response to the secretary general: the Greek government maintained that no measure could be taken before the completion of the Greek-Bulgarian voluntary emigration that had been decided in Neuilly in 1919 and was still in process. He affirmed, however, that Greece intended to respect the terms of the Treaty of Sèvres. Regarding the third question, he stressed that Greece was open to any suggestions concerning the education of the "Slavic-speaking linguistic minority" but that the existence of a religious (i.e., Exarchic) minority was completely unacceptable. Greece would volunteer to examine only the possibility of religious services in the minority language.<sup>7</sup> The Greek government's reply communicated its new policy toward the Slavophones. They were no longer an ethnic minority; they were a linguistic one.

In late 1925, following a legislative decree, a department was established in Greek Macedonia for the administration and supervision of elementary non-Greek education. The new department was manned by three members of the educational council appointed by the minister of education, in addition to the director of the Second Political Department of the Foreign Ministry and three unpaid citizens, all living in Macedonia, suggested by the foreign minister and appointed by the minister of education. A counselor of education proficient in one of the local dialects was appointed head of the new department for a three-year period. It was also decided that only teachers who knew the local dialects would be appointed to teach the non-Greek classes.<sup>8</sup>

The establishment of the Department of Non-Greek Education was just a beginning. Following the decision to employ the local Slavic dialect in the minority schools, the Greek government entrusted to a three-member committee of specialists the preparation of a primer that became known as the "Abecedar." The three members were Georgios Sagiaxis—who had been involved since the early years of the century in folklore and linguistic studies concerning Vlach-

---

<sup>6</sup> ASN, S.343, No. 3, note by Eric Colban, 31 March 1925.

<sup>7</sup> ASN, R.1695 (6), dossier No. 39349, doc. No. 44274, "Minorités Bulgares en Grèce," Greek Delegation to the Secretary General, Bern, 29 May 1925.

<sup>8</sup> Filippou Dragoumis Papers (Gennadios Library), F.104.1., « Peri idruseôs idiou tmêmatos tês stoicheiôdous Ekpaideusôs tês Boreias Elladas para tô ekpaideutikô sumbouliô tou Pspourgeiou tôn Ekklesiastikôn kai tês Dêmosias Ekpaideuseôs ».

speakers and Slavic-speakers and had studied ethnography and linguistics abroad on a Foreign Ministry scholarship<sup>9</sup>—and two philologists, Iosif Lazarou and a certain Papazachariou, both native Vlach-speakers who also knew the local Slavic dialect (*Makedonia*, 9 February 1926).

The product of their combined efforts was a primer in the local Slavic dialect but written in Latin characters. This choice caused an immediate, furious reaction by Bulgaria, since the use of the dialect instead of standard Bulgarian undermined Sofia's traditional argument that Slavic-speaking clearly indicated Bulgarian ethnicity. Mikov, the Bulgarian representative in the League of Nations, expressed his government's discontent regarding the Greek initiative. At the same time, Ivan Sismanov, a university professor in Sofia, published an article in a local newspaper stressing that these measures would reduce the population of Macedonia to a "semi-barbarous" condition (*La Bulgarie*, 23 February 1926; L.M. 1925: 229-232; *Nouvelles Macédoniennes*, 15 October 1925). Moreover, the use of the Latin alphabet was condemned as constituting a "rude insult" for Macedonia's "suffering Bulgarian population" (Central Committee 1928: 23). Macedonian pro-Bulgarian refugee organizations also protested, demanding the immediate introduction of the Cyrillic alphabet (Makedonski Nacionalen Komitet 1926:3; Nacionalen Komitet 1928:4).

At this point a reassessment of the Greek views is necessary. The League of Nations had made it clear that complying with the treaties was not optional. Judging from the sources available, it is reasonable to argue that Greece appeared inclined to respect the linguistic and religious rights of its Slavic-speaking minority, but felt that to identify this minority as Bulgarian, given the bloody clash in the region that had lasted for more than a generation, would have been far too much. It was imperative that the Politis-Kalfov blunder not be repeated, for it was widely known that the overwhelming majority of pro-Bulgarian Slavic-speakers had already emigrated to Bulgaria following the Treaty of Neuilly. On the other hand, the introduction of the Macedonian dialects does not indicate that the Greek authorities had accepted the existence of Macedonian ethnicity, as FYROM historians wish, and indeed as they have argued in order to substantiate their ethnogenetic theories (Andonovski 1974:25-62; Andonovski 1976:65-69, 1988:5-10; Kusevski 1983:179-189, 1987:95-110; Peyov 1988:117-126). Greeks, like all other Balkan peoples at that time, always used the term "Macedonian" to denote one's origin from a specific geographical region. Actually, the Greek views and the related reports were in full agreement with the views of the officials of the League of Nations. For the Greek authorities, the great majority of Slavic-speakers inhabiting Greece after the implementation of the Treaty of Neuilly (most of them living in Greek Western Macedonia) were either pro-Greek in sentiment or indifferent.<sup>10</sup> As John Campbell, a member of the Committee for Refugee Settlement, wrote in April 1925, "These Bulgarophones . . . assisted the Greek Government materially in the past and they are welcomed as excellent cultivators and as Greeks for every practical purpose except that of language."<sup>11</sup>

Regarding Corfe's remark about the likelihood of abetting the "Macedonian movement" by introducing a Macedonian language, it must be stated that he was referring to the IMRO interwar terrorist activities then in progress. But in 1925 the Bulgarian-controlled IMRO (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Committee) called for an "independent Macedonia" only as an initial stage prior to Bulgarian annexation. On the other hand, IMRO United, which was established that very same year, the "Federalists" (an IMRO splinter group), and the Bulgarian Communist Party asked for Macedonian autonomy and union within a Balkan federation, but never mentioned "ethnic Macedonians" entitled to nationhood (Kofos 1964:52-53; Barker 1950:39-40; Livanios 1991:32-39, 80). The term employed by all in 1925 was still "Macedonian people," which did not refer exclusively to Slavic-speakers.

---

<sup>9</sup> Istoriko Archeio tou Ypourgeiou tôn Exôterikôn (henceforth IAYE)1908/ AAK / G , Proxeneion Thessalonikês , Theotokis to the Greek Consulate in Monastir, Athens, 8 July 1904, No. 2405; 23 July 1904, No. 2521; Koromilas to the Greek Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Thessaloniki, 4 April 1905, No. 95 confidential; Koromilas to the Greek Embassy in Berlin, Thessaloniki, 6 April 1905, No. 222 confidential.

<sup>10</sup> ASN, S.343, No. 3, Note by Eric Colban, 31 March 1925.

<sup>11</sup> ASN, Office Autonome pour l' Etablissement des Refugiés Grecs: Files of Mr. Charles B. Eddy, C.129.1, "Albanian, Bulgarian and Armenian Refugees," Campbell to Lindsay, 29 April 1925.

The choice of the Latin alphabet calls for additional comment. Greek officials argued that Latin characters were easier to learn than Cyrillic ones. In fact they had already been employed for other Slavic languages like Polish and Czech.<sup>12</sup> A much more plausible explanation would seem to be the desire to reduce both Bulgarian and Serbian influence, but in any case a linguistic specialist named O'Mologni was invited by the League of Nations late in 1925 to assess the Abecedar case. In his report, entitled "Memorandum Regarding the Introduction by the Greek Government into the Schools of Macedonia of the Abecedar Enclosed,"<sup>13</sup> O'Mologni stated the following: (a) there is not a single Macedonian dialect, (b) the Macedonian dialects are equally akin to both Serbian and to Bulgarian, (c) being "racially" a Bulgarian of Macedonia does not necessarily suggest that one's mother tongue is Bulgarian—it could be Greek or even Turkish, (d) Greece opted for the local dialects in order to bypass the Serbo-Bulgarian linguistic quarrel and to consolidate its diplomatic grip on Macedonia, (e) the linguistic debate in Macedonia is related to various political objectives. Then O'Mologni analyzed the primer itself. He paid special attention to the fact that its phonetics were purely Slavic; no Greek influence could be traced in that area. For the foreign specialist, that was an extremely important sign of good will, given the fact that the Greek language had been occasionally used (since the turn of the century) by the Ottoman state and that it was well understood by a large portion of the local population. As far as the choice of Latin characters was concerned, O'Mologni disputed Greek arguments and stated that the sole Greek motivation was to alleviate Slavic influence in the region. Finally, he praised the Greek initiatives in principle and endorsed the view that the Greek intention to respect the Slavic-speakers' minority rights was honest.

Distributing the primer proved far more difficult than preparing it. However, the book was introduced experimentally in late January 1926 in the region of Amyntaion, near Florina (Western Greek Macedonia). It produced a fierce reaction that continued uninterrupted for several days. Some teachers were harassed and books were burned.<sup>14</sup> On 1 February, Slavic-speakers and Greek-speakers alike joined in a demonstration in Amyntaion. The following resolution was drawn up and telegraphed to the Foreign Ministry:

All the inhabitants and the parents of students attending the schools of Sorovic [now Amyntaion], having been informed by our children about the introduction of the Slavic idiom and sharing their just exasperation and protest regarding the introduction to schools of an unwanted language, we have gathered willingly and spontaneously today in exasperation and we unanimously express our pain for our Government's unholy act to introduce an unwanted linguistic idiom.

We have voted:

We pray that our Government will transmit to the League of Nations our and our children's strong protest against the grave insult to our national pride and consciousness.

We confirm our decision to support until death our fathers' institutions and the pure Greek tradition of Alexander the Great.

We declare a bloody war against any violent and illiberal plot against our Greek mother tongue.

We reject the instruction of the Macedono-Slavic dialect in schools, reviving memories of violence, fear, terror, gallows—i.e., the traditional means of Bulgarian practice.

We appoint a Committee consisted of Mr. Hatzitryfonos, Mr. I. Traikou, Mr. N. Hatzimitsev, and D. Petro Dine and we demand that this resolution be submitted by telegram to the Prime Minister and to the League of Nations.

*(Efimeris ton Valkanion, 2 February 1926)*

---

<sup>12</sup> ASN, S.343, No. 3, Michalakopoulos to Colban, 14 June 1927.

<sup>13</sup> ASN, R.1695 (3), Dossier No. 39349, Doc. No. 47674, "Minorités bulgares en Grèce," 9 December 1925.

<sup>14</sup> IAYE/1926/B/37. «Ekpaideutika Slabophônôn », Télégraphêma Chôrophulakês Sorobits pros to Pspourgeio tôn Stratiôtikôn , Amyntaion, 29 January 1926, No. 280/1.

Despite its pompous and rather clumsy style, the message is clear. The Amyntaion incident worried the Greek government. Theodore Pangalos, who had assumed dictatorial powers the previous month, said that he had given orders to the local authorities to interrogate people on the matter and to punish anyone who had used violence. He also stressed that his government intended to respect all minority rights. Finally, he declared that it was his government's intention to comply with all its obligations to the League of Nations and to proceed with the establishment of churches and schools for the Slavic-speaking population (*Efimeris ton Valkanion*, 2 February 1926). On 6 February 1926 Pangalos met Foreign Minister Kanakaris-Roufos and they decided to forward the primer to schools. In addition, they asked the governor general of Macedonia to furnish them with all necessary information for the establishment and operation of minority schools (*Makedonia*, 7 February 1926).

The government's precise instructions, however, were not exactly the same as those originally planned. For lack of funds, minority schools were to operate not as separate institutions but as classes within the existing Greek schools. Also, the parallel teaching of Greek in minority classes would be compulsory.<sup>15</sup> Instructions were given to the local authorities to choose the appropriate teachers in order to avoid all sorts of complaints.<sup>16</sup> But, in spite of official assurances, the project was shelved. In May 1926 the head of the Public Security Service, Georgios Fessopoulos, asked the Foreign Ministry whether the Abecedar case had proceeded and to what extent. According to his information, a new attempt to impose the book would certainly create disturbances similar to those in Amyntaion.<sup>17</sup>

It seems reasonable to conclude that it was owing to this sort of warning that the Abecedar experiment was never undertaken. Evidently the overwhelming majority of the local community in Western Macedonia was not prepared to accept a policy that it feared might encourage Bulgarian involvement once again in Macedonian affairs and simultaneously lead to its own social and financial marginalization because of lack of fluency in Greek. The short-lived agreement that renamed Slavophones the "Serbian minority" (August 1926) and the subsequent overthrow of Pangalos in the same month helped Greece to change its plans.

Not surprisingly, the long forgotten Abecedar case was rediscovered in the 1990s together with Greece's minority obligations. It is now routinely mentioned in various books (e.g., Poulton 1994:178, 1995:88-89; Danforth 1995:70), and in NGO reports (e.g., Siesby 1993:3; Malcolm, Almond, and Sunley 1994:4), which usually copy the standard arguments advanced by Andonovski (1976, 1988) for the existence and ill-treatment of ethnic Macedonians in Greece. In fact the whole primer was reprinted in Perth in 1993 by the Macedonian Information Centre as part of its campaign for the recognition of a Macedonian ethnic minority in Greece. This recent development (a retrospective reinterpretation of Greek, Bulgarian, and Serbian disputes over Macedonia) is certainly beyond even Corfe's wildest imagination and would have astonished any diplomat involved in the Abecedar affair in the 1920s. But it is also a good example of the unforeseeable consequences that political manipulation of ethnic identities may have in the long run. In a strange way, the 1925 Abecedar was destined to reopen the minority question in Greece whether or not it was ever circulated.

*University of Thessaloniki*

### **Acknowledgments.**

This study has benefited immensely from comments by Dr. Basil C. Gounaris.

---

<sup>15</sup> IAYE/1926/B/37. Pspomnêma agnôstou upallêlou «Peri tês paideias tôn Jenophônôn en Elladi», attached to Lianopoulos (administrative director of the Ministry of Interior), to the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Athens, 27 January 1926, No. 24502.

<sup>16</sup> IAYE/1926/B/37. The Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs to the Governor General in Thessaloniki, Athens, 7 February 1926, No. 1518.

<sup>17</sup> IAYE/1926/G/63/ê, B/37. "Greek-Bulgarian Emigration-Minorities," G. Fessopoulos to the Greek Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 11 May 1926, No. 382/2, confidential.



## **References Cited**

Andonovski, Hristo

1974 "Makedonskoto Nacionalno Malcistvo vo Grcija, Bulgarija i Albanija." *Glasnik 18* (1):25-62. Skopija.

1976 "The First Macedonian Primer between the Two World Wars—The Abecedar." *Macedonian Review* 1:65-69. Skopija.

1988 "Abecedar - The Primer for the Macedonian Children in Aegean Macedonia." *Macedonian Review* 1:5-10. Skopija.

Barker, Elisabeth

1950 *Macedonia. Its Place in Balkan Power Politics*. Liverpool: Royal Institute of International Affairs.

Central Committee

1928 Central Committee of the Union of the Macedonian Political Organizations of the United States of America and Canada. *Balkan Locarno and the Macedonian Question*. Indianapolis.

Danforth, Loring M.

1995 *The Macedonian Conflict. Ethnic Nationalism in a Transnational World*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Dragoumis, Filippos

1925 Filippos Dragoumis Papers, Gennadios Library.

Efimeris ton Valkanion

1925, 1926 *Ephêmeris tôn Balkaniôn*.

Kofos, Evangelos

1964 *Nationalism and Communism in Macedonia*. Thessaloniki: Institute for Balkan Studies.

Kusevski, Voislav D.

1983 "Za pojavata na Abecedarot," *Istorija* 14 (2):179-189. Skopija.

1987 "Za reagiraneto h diplomaskata preppiska vo drustboto na narodite po pojabata na Abecedarot." In *Godisen Zbornik. Annuaire* 14, vol. 40:95-110. Filozofski Fakultet na univerzitetot-Skopje.

La Bulgarie

1926 La Bulgarie.

League of Nations

1919-46 *Archives de la Société des Nations, Section/Minorities*.

L.M.

1925 "Nova Latinska Pizmenost za Makedonskite Bulgari pod Grcija. Abecedar." *Makedonski Pregled* 5-6: 229-232. Sofija.

Livanios, Dimitris

1991 « Ê Makedonia tôn kommounistôn ». M.A. thesis. University of Thessaloniki.

*Makedonia*

1926 *Makedonia*.

Makedonski Nacionalen Komitet

1926 *Rezoliucii vzeti v kongresa na makedonskite emigrantski organizacii v Bulgarija, sastojal se v Sofija na 31 Januarii, 1'i Februarii 1926 godina. Sofija.*

Malcolm, Noel, Mark Almond, and Jonathan Sunley

1994 *Macedonian Minorities: The Slav Macedonians of Northern Greece and the Treatment of Minorities in the Republic of Macedonia.* Oxford: British Helsinki Human Rights Group.

Nacionalen Komitet

1928 Nacionalen Komitet na Sojuza na makedonskite emigrantski organizacii v Bulgarija. *Rezoliucii na VI redoven godisen Kongres na makedonskite emigratski organizacii v Bulgarija vzeti v zasedanijata my na 5,6,7, i 8 Fevruarii 1928 godina v gr. Sofija.* Sofija.

*Nouvelles Macédoniennes*

1925 *Nouvelles Macédoniennes.*

Peyov, Naum

1988 "The Assimilatory Policy of Greece in Aegean Macedonia." *Macedonian Review* 2:117-126. Skopija.

Poulton, Hugh

1994 *The Balkans: Minorities and States in Conflict.* London: Minority Rights Group (reprinted).

1995 *Who are the Macedonians?* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Siesby, Eric

1993 *The Slav Macedonians in Greece. Report of the Danish Helsinki Committee.*

Tounda-Fergadi, A.

1986 *Ellénoboulgarikes meionotêtes. To Prôtokollo Politê Kalphôph 1924-1925.* Thessaloniki: Institute for Balkan Studies.

Ypourgeion ton Exoterikon

1920 Pspourgeion tôn Exôterikôn. *Sunthêkê metaxu tôn proechousôn summachôn kai sunêspismenôn dunameôn kai tês Ellados peri prostasias tôn ethnikôn k.l.p. meionotêtôn pogramheisa en Sebrais tê 28 Iouliou /10 Augoustou 1920.*