"IOS" Interview with the Greek Deputy Foreign Minister - June 8, 2003

Eleftherotypia is an independent newspaper published daily in Athens, Greece. It contains a special Sunday edition with numerous sections. One of these sections, called IOS, included the following interview with the Greek Deputy Foreign Minister, Mr. Andreas Loverdos. The interview focused on resolving the outstanding question of Greek political refugees who are not ethnically Greek.

Background: The political refugees in question are Macedonians who were born in Greece but fled the country during the Greek Civil War (1946 - 1949). They were excluded in 1982 when Greece repatriated its political refugees. At that time Greece only repatriated refugees who declared themselves as ethnically Greek. Such a racist policy discriminated against ethnic Macedonian refugees resulting in immense personal hardship for this group.

In the article Deputy Minister Loverdos proposes that a technical solution be found, for those refugees who are "non-Greek by genus." According to Mr. Loverdos this solution should not be viewed as a bilateral issue between Greece and Macedonia, nor should the outstanding question of Macedonia's name be connected to this issue.

NB: in the article the acronym "FYROM" is used to represent the Republic of Macedonia.

This article was translated by MakNews.com and may be considered a verbatim translation.

(begin translation)

The last wall of the Cold War in Europe is collapsing. Andreas Loverdos analyses the Greek policy for the Western Balkans and declares the solution to the question of the political refugees who originate from Greek West Macedonia.

The Third End of the Civil War

The Last of the Political Refugees

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One of the priorities of the Greek presidency in the EU is to develop relations with the countries of the Western Balkans. And, the country which has demonstrated to be more than ready to respond to the European challenge is non-other than FYROM.

The Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Andreas Loverdos, in his interview with "IOS" describes the framework for the Greek policy and states the importance of supporting and stabilising these countries.

The interview contains a significant news item: the decision of the Greek government, to give, finally, a solution to the injustice targeted against the political refugees of the Civil War who were excluded from the repatriation, because they were "non-Greek by genus". It is a category of citizens from FYROM who originate from Greek Macedonia and who were taken violently from their birthplaces, their relatives and their properties. The first measure, which was announced by Mr. Loverdos is the free and unhindered visits by these citizens to Greece, beginning this summer.

The interview of the Deputy Minister

Mr. Loverdos has a reputation of being "tough" in the Balkans. Perhaps because his responsibility relates to the management of economic aid, or perhaps, because he is known for not mincing his words. However, the opinions of the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs exude the "European" air that has prevailed in the foreign policy of the country during the tenure of Giorgos Papandreou, while the sensitivity he shows on the issue of human rights reminds us of his background as a professor in constitutional law and his theoretical contribution on questions of rights and the harmonization of Greece with the European legal culture.

Three years ago, already a leading, elected deputy of PASOK, Mr. Loverdos had the courage - with an article in the newspaper, "NEA" (December, 2002) - to retrospectively justify the correct position taken by Mr. Mitsotakis, and also the KKE and SYN, who reacted against the authorities in the early 1990s against raising the name of the FYROM as a major national question that considered the existence of this state as factor for the stability of the region.

IOS: How do you confront this issue from your position of responsibility today?

A. Loverdos: "The international community, after WWII in the Balkans ceased to show any interest in the region. The war in Afghanistan, the War in Iraq, and other events have taken attention away from this area. We insist within the European Union that the international community should maintain its interest in this region. We insist because of disturbing indications. We have disturbing indications of inter-ethnic conflicts in the FYROM. We have tensions in Bosnia-Herzegovina. We have the assassination of Djindjich in Serbia. We have, therefore, reasons to worry. We have the problem that can create potential developments in Kosovo. The region of

the Western Balkans has weak links. We should consider with care and attention these weak links for the stability and peace in the region.

This is our policy. This is why the presidency has chosen the Western Balkans as one of the five priorities. This is why we have ratified the agreement for stabilisation and association with the FYROM, this is why we also ratified a similar agreement with Croatia. This is why we are accelerating to reach a corresponding agreement with Albania. In this framework, I truly believe that FYROM, as a strong, European orientated country, will be a benefit to region. What I wrote in 2000 I still believe today and as Deputy Foreign Minister I have the opportunity to personally put this into policy.

IOS: You believe, that is to say, that the FYROM is a viable country in the framework of the Balkans?

A. Loverdos: "I believe it absolutely. It is a viable state and we must strengthen its existence in any way we can."

Steps and Clouds

IOS: How are the bilateral relations developing with the FYROM?

A. Loverdos: "There are sure indications that our bilateral relations are developing very well. There are the investments and trade that go exceptionally well. FYROM is an attractive area for the Greek business community. It is also by our bilateral relations, as they are forming on the political level by our contacts and our collaboration. It is the European orientation of FYROM, which we serve, and in particular with great intensity. We bypassed a policy, which was has been practiced for many years now not to ratify international agreements with the FYROM, and we ratified the agreement of FYROM with the European Union, which is a joint agreement. It was signed by the EU as well as the member states with the FYROM. On the other hand, there are some clouds that arise from the position FYROM takes against us. I underline that within the political system of this country and with the criterion of political profit and political cost, they confront us many times in a way that is unpleasant."

IOS: Do you mean the official authorities?

A. Loverdos: "I mean mainly the political parties and the media. On the government level, this does not happen. Beyond the government level, where the relations are excellent, on the level of society (media, political parties) there are moments that cause dissatisfaction. Even these moments we would like eliminated. By proposing

in the parliamentary session the ratification of the agreement, I said that we in fact prove that we believe in a stable and peaceful FYROM. And we send a message to this country, mainly to her political society - they should also express, in a strong and clear way, the goodwill of an exceptional neighbourhood."

IOS: Is there optimism for eliminating the "thorn" of the name?

A. Loverdos: "We have agreed that this the issue is unsettled. And is the only unsettled question between us. It must be solved by mutual compromise. And because it has still not been solved yet, it functions as a starting point for certain bad moments ".

IOS: After the discussions in the committee and the session of Parliament, do you believe that the political climate in Greece has matured for a compromise on the question of the name?

A. Loverdos: "Because I proposed the agreement in session and the permanent committee, I was particularly impressed that the three parties of Parliament (PASOK, N.D. and SYN) took positive positions in regard to these evolving developments. Even the KKE, that voted against it, did not have any other options. The KKE always votes against all agreements with the EU as a matter of principle, because it believes the EU is a damaging union and it does not benefit these countries to join. Hence, the whole political world of Greece wishes a good neighborhood with the FYROM. There was not even one hysterical voice, I want to point out. That is, not even in the political parties, the deputies that expressed criticism did not vote against the agreement. The only exception was Karatzaferis. Simply, some voices were heard that wanted to underline that it was necessary to confront some anti-Greek feeling - in their opinion - a practice, which is sometimes espoused there and which should not pass unnoticed. I conclude that the Greek political system sees this country in a particularly positive way ".

The return of the refugees

IOS: There is, however, a political and humanitarian question, on the level of society of citizens. We mean the political refugees of the Civil War, who were excluded from the general repatriation and live mainly in the FYROM, having the citizenship of this state.

A. Loverdos: "We do not consider this a subject of our bilateral relations. I repeat that the only unresolved issue in our bilateral relations is the question of name. However, there are through the historical political developments, certain thorns of the past that are related mainly to people which we should uproot. Our political will

is to uproot also the last thorns that have remained. I appreciate that one of them is the one you mentioned. And our own disposition is to offer a solution, and in particular not in the distant future but immediately. This solution should not involve the question of the name, from either side, but simultaneously will not put onto centre stage this thorn that comes from the past. I think that there is, technically, ways for this to be overcome. It requires overcoming this problem with goodwill from both sides. And from our own side, this disposition exists. For example: what functions as obstacles for the visit of these persons to Greece could very well be overcome in a simple but technical way. We are looking for a technical solution and there are a number of them.

IOS: This concerns the freedom to visit and have contacts, which is the primary question?

A. Loverdos: "There exist intense sentimental relations among people. There also exist historical reasons. Now that we have overcome all these problems of the past and the Civil War, we cannot maintain these remnants, which may be political remnants but, on a personal and sentimental level, function in a very hard way. We are disposed to overcome them. I repeat that we seek a technical solution. We have heard interesting and feasible thoughts, that will not offend in any way the unresolved problem of the name, which requires a solution of mutual compromise by the two sides that will lead to an acceptable result. This will not become, however, a prelude for the resolution of the name ".

IOS: Does there exist a time limit or horizon for resolving the problem of the refugees?

A. Loverdos: "We determine it to be within this summer".

"We are not hegemons"

The discussion with the Deputy Minister focuses on the way Greece faces her advantageous position in the Balkans.

A. Loverdos: "We do not assume that Greece is the dominating power of the region. Because we have passed the post Civil War period recently and we still have living memories of that, we know very well what it means when a country helps you economically but you resent it. This happens because the economic assistance was over emphasized and its assistance demanded from you things that reduced your national independence, or the demeaning behavior of those who assist, in their daily routine, which created wounds. I know that many times feelings are created of

complete resentment in the daily behavior of the people. Do you remember the sailors of the 6th fleet in Glyfada?

In the countries, therefore, where Greece has a strong economic presence, this presence should also be accompanied with appropriate behavior. The behaviour of these people should not be offensive ".

IOS: How is this feeling expressed in the implementation of official foreign policy?

A. Loverdos: "We have erased thoughts about "penetration" or about "supremacy". These create wounds. Because, when we talk this way, even here locally, these are heard and they create reservations and phobias and, finally, hatred. We feel that life has placed us ahead politically, economically and socially and this also fills us with obligations and not with the desire to be a dominating power in the region. When they tell us, in our discussions, specifically to me personally, - as I am in charge of managing resources - that you are the leading power of region, I deny it. I say that we recently had a Civil War, we have recent experience as a country that has accepted help, we know that if this is not accompanied with suitable behavior it becomes a boomerang. We do not accept the role of dominant power of the region but her peaceful proponent. This is our duty. With the logic of sovereign power, we would have abandoned the Western Balkans to their fate. We, however, advance with agreements of stabilisation and association with the EU. This means a European orientation. We create a common framework, for the economy, for the democratic institutions, for the administration, which if not observed, if the state does not follow them, it will not advance, at some future time, to become a member of EU. It is paving the road. It proves, that is to say, Greece did not keep the benefits of joining the EU, but extends these in the region, because it believes this will create conditions of normality for the future.

Whoever believes the Balkan fatigue of the international community is without cost is in the dark of night. I remind them of the assassination of Djindjich. Whoever sees these interethnic tensions with satisfaction, within the FYROM, is equally a fool. These are dangerous games."

The problem with the Visas

IOS: Are there practical measures that present this impression of a "leading" power?

A. Loverdos: "The lineups for a visa is a problem that we must confront because it produces resentment. They suffer under the sun and rain and from speculators in the lineup. I have experienced this in Skopje. I was present at a common incident. These must end".

IOS: Do you face the possibility of eliminating the visa altogether for the citizens of FYROM, and to open a consulate in Bitola or to issue visas at the border?

A. Loverdos: "We are trying to find a solution in any way we can. I consider it a high priority that we resolve immediately such problems. This subject is not focused only in Skopje, it concerns a lot of countries. I will go this year during the summer and I will see the problems on the spot, because many times a simple administrative measure hinders the implementation of the foreign policy that we plan".

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