

## Alexis Heraclides, Wonderful Liberal Mind from Greece



### Denko Maleski

*Professor of Doctoral School of International relations,  
Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje  
[denko.v.maleski@gmail.com](mailto:denko.v.maleski@gmail.com)*

The phone call from our Embassy in Athens ended with an agreement to meet in Skopje professor Alexis Heraclides<sup>1</sup>, who writes a book about the relations between our two countries. „American?“, he says in front of the coffee-shop in the building I live, pointing at the way we were dressed: jeans and jacket. At the end of the almost three-hour-long conversation, we parted as friends, with the words of Rick (Humphrey Bogart) in *Casablanca*: “I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship”. He left to me printed parts from the book that *Routledge* from London will publish in May, asking for my opinion. In the meantime, he said, he would come to Skopje again.

In the course of the conversation, we realized that we were both sons of diplomats who served in the Arabic world at approximately the same time, the beginning of the nineteen sixties. At approximately the same age, both of us, as children, learned the first lessons in politics in the Arabic world. He – in Damascus, Syria; me – in Beirut, Lebanon. We remembered the road across the mountain, in fact, he says, two mountains, which connected the two cities. I

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<sup>1</sup> Alexis Heraclides is professor of International Relations, Conflict Theory and Conflict Analysis at Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences, Athens. He has served as senior advisor on minorities and human rights at the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1983-1995).

remembered the mountain town of Chtoura, which brought back in my memory the valley in which there are remains of the ancient Roman city of Baalbek. My father drove on that road to Souq, the famous market in Damascus, while his father drove to Beirut to get Coca-Cola and other Western products. I have known for a long time that the liberally educated people from any part of the world understand each other easily because they speak the same language of peace, respect, tolerance, understanding and cooperation. But it was confirmed that this same language brings close even representatives of inimical nations on the Balkans.

Alexis reminds me that he saw me at the CSCE conference in Helsinki, Finland, in 1992, when he was part of the Greek delegation, in the role of an expert on human rights. He received my message, as a minister of foreign affairs of the not-yet-recognized country, through an associate of mine, and he conveyed it to the Head of the Greek delegation, the deputy foreign minister of foreign affairs. The message was: to meet and to start working on resolving the name dispute because, if we leave it, it will last forever. No meeting took place because the political establishment in Greece did not want it, and the domestic public was not ready to support such policy. Simply speaking, the Greek nationalism wanted us not to exist. The young scientist, however, has different ideas. As a meeting with journalists, among whom someone from our diaspora, he states that in Greece there is Turkish and Macedonian (Slavic) minority. I'm telling you this in confidence, he had said, as if he did not say it. The following day, the representative from our diaspora published his words. Did you have problems at home, I ask him. At the meeting at their Ministry of Foreign Affairs, someone mentioned this, but despite the understanding of Evangelos Kofos<sup>2</sup> about the objective truth, he says: I was saved by the fact that I was the son of a famous diplomat of ours, known for his strong nationalistic positions. He reminded me of my own "dissident youth" and of the time of the struggle against "liberalism" when I was saved by the fact that I was Vlado's son. "Oh, he is our kid," even representatives of the dogmatic wing of the Communist Party would say.

The young scientist Alexis, like myself across the border, continues on his way. He carries out research, writes and talks about minorities in Greece, about improving the relations

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<sup>2</sup> Evangelos Kofos is currently Special Adviser on Balkan affairs at the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP), Athens and member of the Scientific Committee of KEMIT (Thessaloniki). Prior to this, he served for many years at the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs as Special Consultant on Balkan Affairs with the rank of ambassador (source: Eliamep)

with Turkey, and about resolving the Turkish-Greek problem with Cyprus, and thus acquires friends “from the other side”. I envy him for being then, as well as now, part of the educational network of the Western world. Approximately at the same time, I write and talk about the need to redefine the relations between the peoples of the Yugoslav federation and against war, about the rights of Albanians in Macedonia, about the need to resolve the dispute with Greece through a compromise, but also about the need for changing our anti-Bulgarian views, and offer a different view on the Macedonian-Bulgarian history. In the resistance toward the liberal thought, the nationalistic circles of Greece and Macedonia too easily use the label “traitor”, we conclude. That resistance toward the changing of the mindset has consequences on the personal relations between Alexis and his father, who refuses to communicate with him for ten years. During these years, they increasingly grow apart. I hope that he was aware that I was by his side in the hospital, when I was standing by his bed while he was dying. I realize that, in the search for objective historical truth, this scientist – who chooses to speak with complete understanding of the “many narratives” about the nation in the Balkan countries, from the nationalistic to the modern one, hanging on to truth, as he understand it – paid a heavy personal price.

Although I regret the fact that my father died relatively young, I am happy that I did not go through Alexis’s experience. When I think of it, I want to believe that he would not only refuse to be angry about my political views, but would tell me to continue on my way which is different from his, and to look for new solutions of the new problems that the inevitable changes in the lives of people and states bring. My left-wing views in the years of communism even made him proud because he knew that there was only one alternative of that behavior: to be a party sycophant. And is there a father who wants his son to be a sycophant? I believe that, deep inside, Alexis’s father, the first Greek Consul-General who came to Skopje in 1952 together with his three-year-old son, was aware of this and was proud of his son.