The Greater Nations of the Balkan Peninsula by Carl Augustsson

I Introduction

With the break-up of the former Yugoslavia starting in the early 1990s, came the rise of the concept of “greater nations”. “Greater nations” is a reference to nations that are of the opinion that their respective nation-states do not include all of the territory to which they are entitled. Creating greater nations is a reference to attempts to change the borders to include additional territory which respective nation-states feel they are entitled. The point of this article is to give a brief overview of the various greater nations of the Balkan Peninsula.

II Greater Albania

A Kosovo

Kosovo is the most important place with regards to Greater Albania. There are several reasons for this. First of all, there are more ethnic Albanians in Kosovo than in any of the other parts of Greater Albania. In addition, Kosovo is the only part of Greater Albania where ethnic Albanians form the majority of the population. Likewise, Kosovo is the one region of Greater Albania that has already achieved independence. Finally, Kosovo has seen more recent conflict than any other part of Greater Albania.

As of the start of 2008, Kosovo was an autonomous province of Serbia. However, Kosovo has since unilaterally declared its independence from Serbia. Its final status has yet to be determined. Kosovo has been the biggest flashpoint on the Balkan Peninsula in the last few decades. This is not the first time that Kosovo has been such a source of contention and a place of violence:

A [journalistic cliché] of the nineteenth century described the Kosovo region as the lost heart of the Balkans. Like many clichés, this one was both slightly foolish and, at the same time, suggestive of a significant truth. Although Kosovo has played a central role in Balkan history, it has remained, during much of that history, mysterious and little known to outsiders. Western knowledge of the whole central Balkan area was confined to the major through-routes until surprisingly recently: European maps of this area contained gross inaccuracies well into the late nineteenth century. Yet it was not only Westerners who knew little of the area. According to a Bulgarian geographer [Mladenov (Младенов)] who visited Kosovo during the First World War, parts of the Kosovo region had been, until just a few years previous, ‘almost as unknown and inaccessible as a stretch of land in Central Africa’. Political factors are the main reason for the inaccessibility of Kosovo during the last period of Ottoman rule, which was marked by chronic disorder, violent rebellion and even more violent repression. But simple physical geography also matters, helping as it does to explain both the seclusion of the area and, at the same time, its near-central importance. (Malcolm, 1998, p1)

Kosovo is a relatively small area geographically, only about half the size of Slovenia, with a population of Kosovo is roughly 2.1 million. As a result, Kosovo is one of the more densely populated places in Europe. The capital of Kosovo is Prishtina (Приштина). Kosovo is a landlocked area that shares a common border with Serbia Proper, Albania Proper, Montenegro, and Macedonia.

The largest ethnic group present in Kosovo is the ethnic Albanians, who form approximately 88% of the population. Most of these Albanians are Ghegs. The Serbians form the second largest ethnic group in Kosovo with 7% of the population. The ethnic Serbians are concentrated in several places in Kosovo, especially in the north in and around the city of Mitrovica (Митровица). Together, these two ethnic groups form 95% of the population of Kosovo. As one can see, there is no “Kosovar” ethnic group. In this sense, Kosovo is analogous to Belgium and Moldova in that it lacks an ethnic group of its own and is instead comprised of ethnic groups from the surrounding nation-states[[1]](#footnote-1).

As is the case with Albania Proper, reliable statistics on religious adherence are lacking. The Serbians are largely Orthodox Christians. The ethnic Albanians are divided between Christianity and Islam. As is the case with Gheg Albanians in general, the Christian Albanians in Kosovo are mostly Catholics. Moreover, as is also the case with Muslims in Albania Proper, a number of Muslim Albanians in Kosovo are converting back to Christianity. However, it is nearly certain that a larger percentage of Kosovar Albanians are Muslims than are the Albanians of Albania Proper.

As had been previously mentioned, Kosovo had been a region of Serbia—and (at the time) by extension, Yugoslavia—prior to the 1999 conflict. After the conclusion of the 1999 conflict, Kosovo—while still under de jure Serbian control—became administered by the United Nations under resolution number 1244:

[This resolution] provides for the development of international civil and military presence in Kosovo, under UN auspices. It authorises the Secretary General of the United Nations…to establish an international civil presence to provide an interim administration for Kosovo.

KFOR, the NATO-led international military presence in Kosovo, continues to be responsible for overall security.

The legal system in Kosovo is a combination of legislation adopted by the Kosovo authorities, regulations and administration directions of the United Nations Interim Administration in Kosovo…, and Yugoslav laws in place before 22 March 1989. (European Union’s *Kosovo 2008 Progress Report*, 2007, pps5-6)

There had been a number of attempts to broker an agreement between the Serbian government and the Albanian Kosovar leadership on the final status of Kosovo. One of the most important mediators in these talks was Martti Ahtisaari, the former president of Finland. In March of 2007, Mr. Ahtisaari put forward a plan that—although the word “independence” was never actually mentioned—would have led to the “supervised independence” of Kosovo. However, the Serbian parliament rejected this plan with near unanimity.

The international community then attempted to impose a solution via the United Nations. However, the solution that the international community attempted to impose was basically the same Ahtisaari plan that had already been rejected by the Serbians. Russia therefore vetoed this proposed solution in the United Nations Security Council. At this point, Russia and several others suggested another round of talks between the two sides. These talks, which never resulted in any agreement were brokered by a troika consisting of the EU, the US, and Russia. Part of the reason why is that once again, although the word “independence” itself was never actually mentioned, it was obvious that the talks were designed to merely negotiate the terms upon which Kosovo would become independent from Serbia. Russia and others were in favor of continuing these talks beyond the self-imposed deadline in late 2007, claiming that progress had been made and that the Serbians had put forward a number of “interesting” suggestions. However, the United States and others claimed that further talks would be pointless.

As was previously mentioned, Kosovo declared unilateral independence from Serbia on February 17, 2008. This declaration of independence has been recognized by both the United States of America and 22 of the 27 European Union member states. In addition, a number of other states in other parts of the world (about one-third of the member states of the United Nations) also recognize Kosovo as an independent state. However, some European Union states—namely Greece, Cyprus, Romania, Spain, and Slovakia—do not recognize Kosovo as an independent state. The main reason why some of these EU states do not recognize Kosovo as being independent is that they are concerned that this could set a precedent for other break-away region, which some of these states—notably Spain—have. More notably, Russia has also not recognized Kosovo’s declaration of independence. Russia’s refusal to recognize Kosovo as an independent state is the biggest reason why Kosovo cannot join the United Nations, as Russia possesses a veto over all United Nations decisions.

Serbia continues to claim that Kosovo remains a de jure part of Serbia. Upon Serbia’s request, the United Nations General Assembly requested that the International Court of Justice determine whether Kosovo’s unilateral declaration of independence was legal. As a result of all of this, Kosovo’s status is unclear.

Kosovo is sub-divided into 30 different municipalities. Some of these municipalities are Serbian-dominated. The central Kosovar authorities in Prishtina do not have full control over some of these Serbian-dominated municipalities. Like the central government of Serbia Proper, these Kosovar Serbians do not recognize Kosovo as an independent state and are instead of the opinion that their municipalities remain a part of Serbia. Indeed, these areas even conducted their own municipal elections in May of 2008. Both the central Kosovar government and the United Nations Interim Administration in Kosovo have declared these elections to be null and void.

It should be noted that the European Union has stated in its 2008 report on Kosovo that it—the European Union—believes that the ethnic Albanian-dominated central Kosovar government has made a number of attempts to reach out to and to reassure the ethnic Serbian citizens of Kosovo. One example that the EU provides for this is the efforts that the Kosovar government has made with regards to the protection of Serbian Orthodox sites:

The government continued to work on the legal and institutional framework for the protection of religious and cultural heritage. The assembly adopted the Law on Special Protective Zones to protect in particular the Serbian Orthodox sites in Kosovo…After repeated attacks against religious and cultural sites—in particular Serbian Orthodox sites—earlier in the year [2008], security of [religious and cultural sites] is now generally assured…The Kosovo Police Operational Order for the protection of Serbian Orthodox sites was finalized. It now needs to be implemented. (European Union’s *Kosovo 2008 Progress Report*, 2007, pps22-23)

Kosovo adopted a constitution on April 9, 2008. This constitution entered into force on June 15, 2008. It is largely based on the never-implemented Ahtisaari plan. Indeed, the Kosovar constitution actually mentions that the provisions in the Ahtisaari plan take precedent over all other legal provisions in Kosovo. The European Union stated in its annual report on Kosovo that it believes that the constitution of Kosovo meets the standards for democracy and the protection of human rights.

Elections were held for the Kosovar parliament in November 2007:

The assembly was reconstituted following the general elections of November 2007, which were held in a fair and efficient manner. The Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) received 34% of the vote, the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) 23%, the Kosovo New Alliance (AKR) 12% and the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK), the Democratic League of Dardania (LDD) each received 10%, the Reformist Party (ORA) 4% and the Party of Justice (PD) 2%. A total of thirteen minority parties received a total of 5% of the vote. (European Union’s *Kosovo 2008 Progress Report*, 2007, pps9-10)

The president[[2]](#footnote-2) of Kosovo is elected by the parliament. The current president is Fatmir Sejdiu, who took office on February 10, 2006. The current prime minister of Kosovo is Hashim Thaçi. He has been in office since January 9, 2008. He presides over a two-party coalition between the assembly’s two largest parties. According to the EU’s report, many of the ethnic Serbian members of the assembly have since rejoined it, after having boycotted the assembly following the declaration of independence.

While the EU may be generally pleased with Kosovo with regards to democracy and human rights, the same thing cannot be said about the judiciary. As is the case with most of the other places in Eastern Europe, the European Union believes that Kosovo must do much more in order to improve its weak judiciary and to fight corruption.

As has been previously mentioned, Kosovo’s final status has yet to be fully determined. It is important to note that there are parts of Serbia Proper that are dominated by ethnic Albanians. These areas are relatively small within Serbia and they border Kosovo. It is possible that these areas of Kosovo could be exchanged with Kosovo for areas of Kosovo that are dominated by ethnic Serbians in a potential final agreement between Serbia and Kosovo in exchange for Serbia’s recognition of Kosovo as an independent state.

B Macedonia

After Kosovo, Macedonia is the most important part of Greater Albania. There are several reasons for this. First of all, Macedonia is third only to Albania Proper for having the highest percentage of ethnic Albanians. Also, Macedonia is also third only to Kosovo and Albania Proper for having the largest number of overall ethnic Albanians.

Macedonia, a landlocked state that lies at the south-center of the Balkan Peninsula, is about the size of Latvia. Macedonia has a population of a little more than two million. Even with this relatively small population, Macedonia is (as will be pointed out) one of the more ethnically diverse states in Europe. Nearly 70% of the population is classified as being urban, which is higher than in Albania but still lower than it is in most of the other European states. The population of the capital (and largest) city, Skopje is 475,000. Macedonia shares a common border with Serbia, Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, and (regardless of whatever status it now has) Kosovo.

Macedonia has large minority populations. In fact, Macedonians only form 64% of the population. While that is a comfortable majority, it is still less than it is in most nation-states. It is, however, worth pointing out that there are other nation-states in which the dominant nation forms an even smaller percentage of the population. A good example of this is Latvia where Latvians form a mere 58% of the population.

The largest ethnic minority group in Macedonia is the Albanians, constituting 25% of the population. Many of these ethnic Albanians feel more loyalty towards Albania than Macedonia and would like to see western Macedonia become a part of the Republic of Albania rather than remain a part of Macedonia. The ethnic Albanians in Macedonia are mostly Gheg Albanians. A larger percentage of the Albanian population in Macedonia is Muslim than in Albania Proper. Other noteworthy minority groups in Macedonia include Turks (4% of the population), the Roma (2%), and Serbians (2%).

As has been previously mentioned, most European states—in contrast to many the world’s non-European states—are nation-states. Some notable exceptions to this statement include Belgium and Moldova, which are two states that contain small pieces of several nations that have their own nations-states in which the majority of the population of these nations live. Likewise, there are also states in Europe such as Austria that are essentially composed of a small part of one nation that has its own nation-state in which the majority of that nation lives.

The extent to which the Macedonians constitute a nation is debatable. Indeed, even the name itself is controversial. The Greeks object to the fact that this state calls itself “Macedonia” for several reasons. First of all, Greece has three provinces in the north of its state which contain the name “Macedonia”. There is some concern—or at least there was initially when Macedonia declared independence from Yugoslavia in 1992—that the “Republic of Macedonia” could try to lay claim to these three Greek provinces.

The bigger objection of the Greeks is the fact that they believe that “Macedonia” is a Greek name of historical importance to Ancient Greece and that no non-Greek state should be allowed to use it, as that would constitute theft of Greek heritage. In essence, the Greeks are claiming that this is the international relations equivalent of copyright infringement. As far as the Greeks are concerned, “Macedonians” are Greeks in the same manner that Bavarians are Germans. After all, just as Bavarians are Germans who live in the south of the Germany so are the Macedonians Greeks who live in the northeast corner of Greece.

The Greeks are concerned that many people around the world will mistakenly come to believe that the Macedonians of Antiquity were ethnic Slavs, as the ethnic Macedonians are. After all, the Slavs did not even arrive on the Balkan Peninsula until centuries after the end of the Ancient Greece Era. A good example of this is Alexander the Great. Alexander the Great is often referred to as having been a Macedonian, since he comes from the Macedonian part of the Balkan Peninsula[[3]](#footnote-3). However, he was an ethnic Greek as there were no Slavs present on the Balkan Peninsula at the time. Indeed, part of the evidence given by the Greeks that the Macedonians are stealing their heritage is the fact that they renamed Skopje airport after Alexander the Great. The Greeks claim that the Macedonians are trying to imply that Alexander the Great was a Slav. At a minimum the Greeks are concerned that people will mistakenly think that Alexander the Great was a Slav.

On the other side, the Macedonians claim that they have used this name to refer to themselves long before they seceded from Yugoslavia in 1992. In this sense, it is therefore too late for the Greeks to object to their use of the name “Macedonia”. After all, the Macedonians have used this name for a while now and have become attached to it. Likewise, they see no reason why they should have to change their name just because somebody else objects to their use of it.

It has been difficult to find a compromise between the Greeks and the Macedonians with regards to the use of the name “Macedonia” by Macedonians to describe themselves. Several different compromise names have been suggested. Examples of suggested compromise names include “Northern Macedonia” and “Slavic Macedonia”. The most commonly used compromise name is “The Former Yugoslav (or Yugoslavian) Republic of Macedonia. This is the name that the European Union uses to refer to the state in question. As one can see, this suggested name is quite long and cumbersome. For this reason, this compromise name is often shortened to FYROM. Perhaps FYROM or Fyrom would make a better compromise name. In this instance, the language would probably be known as Fyromian and the people would probably be known as Fyromians. The Greek government has suggested the name “Macedonia-Skopje” as a compromise. In the end, “Fyrom” would most likely be the easiest compromise name to use.

As was also the case with Kosovo, Macedonia also experienced ethnic violence between ethnic Albanians and ethnic Slavs. If Kosovo’s declaration of independence were to become fully recognized, Macedonia would probably then become the major focus of those who wish to create Greater Albania.

C Montenegro

Unlike either Kosovo or Macedonia, Montenegro is not one of the more important parts of Greater Albania. However, Montenegro is still an important part of Greater Albania, as Montenegro contains pockets which are dominated by its ethnic Albanian minority.

Montenegro is (unless one counts Kosovo as having achieved full independence) the world’s newest state, as it became independent in 2006. This occurred when Montenegro chose to dissolve its union with Serbia. Under the terms of the agreement, Serbia inherited all of the union’s international memberships and embassies. As a result of Montenegro’s recent independence, Montenegro lacks a certain amount of the statistical data that is available for states that have been independent for a longer period of time.

Montenegro is one of the smaller European states in terms of geographic area, about half the size of Belgium. Montenegro is also a small state in terms of population, as the population of Montenegro stands at just under 700,000. The capital and largest city of Montenegro is Podgorica (Подгорица), with a population of approximately 140,000. In addition to Podgorica (which is situated in the interior of Montenegro), Montenegro also has a number of towns such as Bar (Бар), Budva (Будва), and Kotor (Котор) on its Adriatic coast, some of which are UNESCO world heritage sites. Along with the Adriatic Sea, Montenegro also shares a common border with Albania, Serbia, Kosovo (regardless of whatever status it has), Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia.

As is the case with language, the case of ethnicity is also somewhat ambiguous with regards to Montenegro. Some Montenegrins believe that they constitute a distinct ethnic group from that of the Serbians. “Montenegrins themselves are aware of another tradition that rejects the idea that Orthodox Montenegrins are Serbs and instead claims that they constitute a separate ethnic group of mixed Slavic-Albanian-Vlach origins, emphasizing the importance of Montenegro’s divergent history” (Roberts, 2007, p3). However, there are also many Montenegrins who believe that they are an extension of the Serbian nation.

In addition to the combined 75% of the population that is either Serbian or Montenegrin, there are several other ethnic groups present in Montenegro. The largest ethnic group in Montenegro (after Serbians and Montenegrins) are the Bosnians, who form 8% of the population of Montenegro. The Bosnians—as has been previously mentioned—are also a Serbo-Croatian speaking people. The only difference is that the Bosnians are Muslims whereas the other Serbo-Croatian peoples are Christian.

The ethnic Albanians form 5% of the population of Montenegro. Nearly all of the ethnic Albanians in Montenegro are Gheg Albanians. Most of these ethnic Albanians are concentrated in several pockets in the south of Montenegro on or near the Albanian border, especially around Lake Scutari. It is these pockets that many Albanians (both within Albania Proper and Greater Albania) would like to see become a part of the Republic of Albania.

D Greece (Ελλάδα) and Other Areas

This study on Greater Albania has—up until now—focused exclusively on states that were a part of the former Yugoslavia. There is a good reason for this: nearly all of Greater Albania was located within the former Yugoslavia. That is not to say, though, that Greater Albania is located entirely within the former Yugoslavia.

The best example of Greater Albania outside of the former Yugoslavia is Greece[[4]](#footnote-4). This makes sense when one considers the fact that Greece is the only non-former Yugoslavian state with which Albania shares a common border. As was previously mentioned, many Albanians were of the opinion that the Albanian state that re-emerged at the start of the 20th century was only half of the size—both in terms of geographic area and population—that it should have been. While most of the territory that these Albanians felt should have been theirs went to the new Kingdom of Yugoslavia, a smaller part of this territory went to Greece. This area is now the north-western corner of the Republic of Greece.

According to ethnologue.com, the population of this community is estimated at approximately 150,000. These Albanians are known as “Arvanitika”.

Unlike the parts of Greater Albania that were a part of the former Yugoslavia, the ethnic Albanians in Greece have been more assimilated into the non-Albanian culture in which they live. Many of these Albanians—especially younger ones—are more likely to speak Greek than Albanian. This fact is part of the reason that many Albanians outside of Greece claim that these ethnic Albanians are being persecuted and are being forced to “become Greeks”. This is a charge which the Greeks deny. The Albanians of northern Greece are nearly all Orthodox Christians.

In the end, this area is highly unlikely to become caught up in the drive to create a Greater Albania. There are several reasons for this. First of all, the number of ethnic Albanians living in Greece is smaller than it is in the other states which contain parts of Greater Albania, with the exception of Montenegro. The ethnic Albanian population in Greece is even lower when one considers the fact that ethnic Albanians form a much smaller percentage of the population in Greece than in all of the other states that contain parts of Greater Albania. Likewise, Greece is an older and more established state that has not recently gained independence during a time of war. Moreover, Greece has been a full member of both NATO and the European Union for decades and it would be much more difficult to force such a state to give up territory. Finally, Albanians wishing to create a Greater Albania would be far more likely to concentrate on other states first, especially Macedonia. This is due to the fact that there are more ethnic Albanians in these states and that these states would probably make an easier target. Besides, there are many ethnic Greeks living in the territory which the supporters of the concept of Greater Albania believe should be theirs, thereby making any attempt at secession from Greece nearly impossible.

There are also places in Europe outside of the Balkan Peninsula with notable ethnic Albanian populations[[5]](#footnote-5). These Albanians moved to other parts of Europe centuries ago in order to flee the Ottoman Turks. The non-Balkan European state with the largest ethnic Albanian population is Italy. According to ethnologue.com, there are approximately 250,000 ethnic Albanians living in Italy. Of these 250,000, approximately 80,000 speak Albanian. However, the language that they speak is an older dialect of Tosk Albanian, known as “Arbëreshë”. Most of these ethnic Albanians live on the island of Sicily.

Even though there are other pockets of Albanian settlement in other parts of Europe—such as Ukraine for example—Italy is the only non-Balkan state with any Albanian population of significance. It is therefore not necessary to examine any of the other states with ethnic Albanian settlements from centuries ago. Obviously, none of these areas—not even Sicily—will ever become a part of Greater Albania for several reasons. First of all, there is the obvious fact that none of these areas share a common border with the Republic of Albania. Also, there is the fact that ethnic Albanians form small percentages of the overall population in all of these areas outside of the Balkan Peninsula. It is therefore not necessary to examine any of these areas any further.

III Greater Serbia

Of all of the “greater nations” on the Balkan Peninsula, it is Greater Serbia that has been the most debated and has arguably caused the most trouble. Serbia was the most important and influential of the six republics which comprised the former Yugoslavia. Indeed, the kingdom of Yugoslavia was first formed with the merger of Serbia and Montenegro, thereby making Serbia one of the first two republics of Yugoslavia. Likewise, it was the king of Serbia who later became the king of Yugoslavia. Moreover, the capital of Serbia—Belgrade—was also the capital of the whole of Yugoslavia.

In addition to having the most influential republic within Yugoslavia, the Serbians were also a significant ethnic minority in several other republics of the former Yugoslavia, especially in Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. When Yugoslavia was one state, it was not terribly important whether the ethnic Serbians were actually living within the Yugoslavian republic of Serbia or one of the other republics of Yugoslavia. With the beginnings of the break-up of Yugoslavia in 1991, the possibility of ethnic Serbians no longer being ruled by Belgrade became an issue.

When Slovenia and Croatia first declared independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, there was not much international support for their drive for independence, as the world community at first preferred to maintain the territorial integrity of Yugoslavia. The Serbian-dominated Yugoslavian federal government interpreted this as permission to use force in order to try to prevent the secession of Slovenia and Croatia. The international community soon became disgusted with the bloodshed and as a result, began to recognize Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (which declared independence in the beginning of 1992) as being independent states. This, however, would mean that the ethnic Serbian minority in both Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina would no longer be living within a Serbian-dominated state and would also no longer be ruled by Belgrade. Thus was the beginning of the drive to create Greater Serbia.

At that point, the focus of territorial integrity then shifted to maintaining the territorial integrity of the states which had just declared independence. This was in spite of the fact that these entities had either never been independent states, or had at least not been independent in a number of centuries. Likewise, the borders of these states do not completely follow natural geographic features—such as mountains or rivers—nor are they islands in which case the concept of territorial integrity would be much more obvious. It is therefore somewhat dubious for the international community to support the territorial integrity of states that had—at a minimum—not been independent states in centuries. The conflicts in both Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina then shifted to expanding the borders of the Republic of Serbia to include Serbian-dominated parts of these two states, or at least to make these areas independent from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, respectively. It is also important to note that—obviously—losing Kosovo runs contrary to the concept of Greater Serbia.

A Montenegro

There is one other important point to mention with regards to Greater Serbia: Montenegro. The question of ethnicity is somewhat complicated with regards to Montenegro. The main issue is whether the Montenegrins constitute their own ethnic group and consequently their own nation, or whether the Montenegrins are merely an extension of the Serbian nation. For example, in terms of religion both the Serbians and the Montenegrins are predominately Orthodox Christians. Until recently, Montenegrin Orthodox churches were under the Serbian Orthodox Patriarch. However, a separate Montenegrin Orthodox Church began to be created shortly before Montenegro became an independent state in 2006. Nevertheless, even with their own Orthodox Church there is still virtually no difference between the Montenegrins and the Serbians with regards to religion, since both groups are predominately Orthodox Christian.

Likewise, in terms of language both groups have historically been considered to speak the same Serbo-Croatian language. As was previously mentioned, Serbo-Croatian is often no longer thought of as being one single language, largely as a result of the political developments that have occurred in the former Yugoslavia over the past few decades. It is, however, more difficult to divide the Serbo-Croatian language if it is now to be divided into several different languages based more on political rather than linguistic considerations. If the Serbo-Croatian language is to be divided into several different closely-related languages, there would be little doubt that both Croatian and Serbian would constitute two separate languages. It is somewhat more debatable as to whether Bosnian should also be considered its own language. However, if Bosnian is not its own language, then it is not clear as to whether Bosnian should be considered as a dialect of Croatian or a dialect of Serbian.

Prior to becoming an independent state in 2006, Montenegro had usually been seen as being a Serbian-speaking region. However, many Montenegrins now claim that they speak their own Montenegrin language. Montenegrin is less likely than Croatian, Serbian, or even Bosnian to be a language of its own. Nonetheless, since the division of languages within the former Yugoslavia is now often based more on political considerations rather than linguistic considerations, it seems logical that since Montenegro is now an independent state, some Montenegrins would want to think that they have their own Montenegrin language. It must be stated, though, that the official language of Montenegro is called “Serbian”. As was also true in Serbia, both the Latin alphabet and the Cyrillic alphabet are used in Montenegro.

As is the case with language, the case of ethnicity is also somewhat ambiguous with regards to Montenegro. Some Montenegrins believe that they constitute a distinct ethnic group from that of the Serbians. “Montenegrins themselves are aware of another tradition that rejects the idea that Orthodox Montenegrins are Serbs and instead claims that they constitute a separate ethnic group of mixed Slavic-Albanian-Vlach origins, emphasizing the importance of Montenegro’s divergent history” (Roberts, 2007, p3). However, there are also many Montenegrins who believe that they are an extension of the Serbian nation.

According to the *2010 World Almanac*, 43% of the population of Montenegro is Montenegrin and 32% of the population of Montenegro is Serbian. However, are the Montenegrins and the Serbians truly two different ethnic groups or are the Montenegrins merely an ethnic sub-group of the Serbians? There are, however, some sociological differences between the ethnic Serbians[[6]](#footnote-6) and the ethnic Montenegrins. The biggest difference between the ethnic Serbians and ethnic Montenegrins is the existence (or lack thereof) of a clan society. Montenegro—along with Herzegovina within Bosnia and Herzegovina—has historically been a clan society, whereas Serbia has not. Likewise, Northern Albania {i.e. Gheg Albania and the areas of Greater Albania (including most of those within the former Yugoslavia) which are predominately Gheg} has also historically been a clan society.

With little to no difference between the Montenegrins and the Serbians with regards to both language and religion, it is difficult to see any major distinctions between the two groups. Indeed, the existence of a clan system amongst the Montenegrins and the lack of one amongst the Serbians is probably the only real difference between the Serbians and the Montenegrins. It must be stated, though, that there is historical evidence that there used to be a clan system in Serbia, but that the Serbian clan system died out under Ottoman rule. Therefore, do the Montenegrins constitute a nation of their own or are they merely an extension of the Serbian nation? In the end, it must be remembered that—as was mentioned in chapter two—the biggest qualifier for nationhood is merely the belief that a group of people has that they constitute a distinct nation. As a result, it is possible to claim that the Montenegrins constitute a separate nation if they simply believe themselves to be a separate nation. In the end, since Montenegro had an agreement with Serbia with regards to independence, the split between the two was largely painless.

IV Greater Croatia

The idea of Greater Croatia emerged shortly after Bosnia and Herzegovina declared independence from Yugoslavia. After all, just as the ethnic Serbians in Bosnia and Herzegovina wanted to be attached to Serbia Proper, so too did the ethnic Croatians in Bosnia and Herzegovina want to be attached to Croatia Proper. As was also the case with Greater Serbia, Greater Croatia was not an issue until the beginning of the breakup of Yugoslavia, as the entire Croatian nation—like the entire Serbian nation—was contained within the borders of the former Yugoslavia. However, now that Yugoslavia has broken up, the Bosnian Croatians are living in a separate state from that of the bulk of the Croatian nation.

Many of the Bosnian Croatians are more loyal to Croatia than Bosnia and Herzegovina. Indeed, most of the Bosnian Croatians in Bosnia and Herzegovina have Croatian citizenship. If the Bosnians Serbians are able to secede from Bosnia and Herzegovina and join Serbia Proper, it would be entirely conceivable that the Bosnian Croats would then want to secede from Bosnia and Herzegovina and join Croatia Proper. However, it is unlikely that the Bosnian Croats would make such a move prior to the Bosnian Serbians making a similar move.

V Greater Bulgaria

The concept of Greater Bulgaria is also quite relevant to the issue of Greater Albania, as both concepts involve the Republic of Macedonia. Indeed, nearly all of the concept of Greater Bulgaria is based on Bulgaria gaining most or even all of the Republic of Macedonia. It is debatable as to whether the Macedonians constitute a distinct nation of their own or whether the Macedonians are merely an extension of the Bulgarian nation. Those who believe in the concept of Greater Bulgaria are of the opinion that the Macedonians are an extension of the Bulgarian nation and that the Macedonian language is only a dialect of the Bulgarian language. They therefore believe that the Republic of Macedonia—or at least most of it—should be joined to the Republic of Bulgaria.

Supporters of the concept of Greater Bulgaria point out that at one point in history the area that is now the Republic of Macedonia was one of the more (at one point perhaps even the most) important part of Bulgaria, just as Kosovo was at one point the most important part of Serbia. What, then, are the differences between the Bulgarians and the Macedonians?

Linguistically, it can be difficult to distinguish between a dialect and an independent language. This is true with regards to the issue as to whether Macedonian is an independent language or merely a dialect of Bulgarian. There is no question that Bulgarian and Macedonian are quite similar. Indeed, there are few examples anywhere else in Europe of two languages (assuming that Macedonian is an independent language!) that are as similar to each other as Bulgarian and Macedonian. One notable example is the small difference between the Czech and Slovak languages. Likewise, Croatian and Serbian are now often referred to as being separate languages, even though some linguists claim that the differences between Croatian and Serbian are more political than linguistic. If Croatian and Serbian are considered separate languages, then Bulgarian and Macedonian should also be considered to be separate languages. Basically, while it is possible to make a case that Macedonian is merely a dialect of Bulgarian, there is certainly precedent in Europe for considering languages with differences as small as these two have between them to be two separate languages.

There is one interesting difference between the Bulgarian and Macedonian languages that is worth noting: the different forms of the Cyrillic alphabets that the two languages use. While the Cyrillic alphabet is used to write six different official, national languages in Europe, no two of these six variants are identical. The Macedonian variant of Cyrillic is based on the Serbian variant, whereas the Bulgarian variant more closely resembles the Russian variant.

It is worth speculating whether these differences in the two respective versions of the Cyrillic alphabet could help form somewhat of a national identity for the Macedonians that is distinct from a Bulgarian national identity. After all, as was previously mentioned, language is one of the most important characteristics with regards to national identity, as linguistic differences can lead to a sense of uniqueness. This sense of uniqueness need not be limited to the spoken language, as differences in orthography can also help create a sense of linguistic uniqueness. This can be true even if the differences are limited to different letters of the same alphabet rather than different alphabets altogether.

In the end, it is possible to make a case either way that the Macedonians constitute a nation of their own or that they are merely a part of the Bulgarian nation. There is no question that the Macedonians have some characteristics that distinguish them from the Bulgarians. What is in dispute is whether these differences are enough to create a distinct national identity. The fact that the Macedonians have a state of their own can help create a national identity, though this obviously does not always happen as there are a number of states around the world that lack a common national identity. In addition to having their own state and the noted linguistic differences between Bulgarian and Macedonian, the Macedonians now have their own Orthodox church with their own Orthodox patriarch. In the end, it must be remembered that the most important characteristic with regards to national identity is simply a collective group’s belief that they constitute a nation. The Macedonians have enough of a national conscious to be a nation of their own.

Parts of south-western Bulgaria have more in common with the Macedonians than they do with other Bulgarians. Therefore, if the Macedonians do indeed have their own national identity, then perhaps it could be argued that it would be more logical for south-western Bulgaria to be a part of Macedonia rather than Bulgaria. However, if the Macedonians do not have their own national identity, then perhaps it would be more logical for Macedonia (or at least most of it) to become joined to Bulgaria. Therefore, it is perhaps possible to claim that the current border between Bulgaria and Macedonia is a compromise!

Like the Bulgarians and the Serbians, the Macedonians are predominately Orthodox Christians with their own Orthodox patriarch. Previously, the Macedonians had been under Orthodox patriarchs from other predominately Orthodox states such as Bulgaria, Serbia, or Greece. Some Bulgarians are of the opinion that the Macedonians should not be allowed to have their own Orthodox patriarch since (in the opinion of these Bulgarians) the Macedonians are merely an extension of the Bulgarian nation.

The concept of Greater Bulgaria would also include parts of northeastern Greece, including even Thessaloniki {(Θεσσαλονήκι) the second largest city in present-day Greece}. These supporters of Greater Bulgaria point out that two of the most famous Bulgarians who ever lived—Saints Kyril (Кирил) and Metodius (Методи)—lived in this area.

There is not a large movement within the Republic of Bulgaria to create Greater Bulgaria.

VI Greater Greece

The issue of Greater Greece is somewhat more complicated than that of the “other greater nations” of the Balkan Peninsula. The most important part of Greater Greece is Cyprus. Although Cyprus is an independent state, it is basically an extension of the Republic of Greece: in essence, Cyprus is another Greek island.

The Republic of Cyprus is an island state in the Eastern Mediterranean that is majority ethnic Greek, as 78% of the population of Cyprus is ethnically Greek. The ethnic Turks, at 18% of the population, form the largest ethnic minority on the island. However, nearly all of the ethnic Greeks live on the southern part of the island, whereas nearly all of the ethnic Turks live on the northern part of the island. The two groups, therefore, live separately.

Northern Cyprus occupies over one third of the island of Cyprus, including part of the capital city of Nicosia (Λέφκοσια). The population of Northern Cyprus is slightly higher than a quarter of a million. This area has been under Turkish occupation since 1974. The Turks maintain a number of soldiers in Northern Cyprus.

Although the government of the Republic of Cyprus, based in the south of the island, is often referred to as being the government of Southern Cyprus, it is technically the government of the whole island of Cyprus. Northern Cyprus is therefore legally a part of the Republic of Cyprus and—by extension—the European Union. As a result, under international law, Turkey’s occupation of Northern Cyprus is illegal. Northern Cyprus declared its independence on November 15, 1983. However, the independence of Northern Cyprus is recognized only by Turkey. In reality, Northern Cyprus has de facto become an autonomous province of Turkey.

In order to better understand the situation on Cyprus, it is necessary to examine the history of the island. Cyprus has been ruled by a number of different entities throughout its history. The Roman Empire, Byzantine Empire, and Venice have all ruled over Cyprus. The island was under Ottoman Turkish rule from 1571-1878. The United Kingdom gained control of the island in 1878 and ruled over it until 1960. Prior to gaining independence, a constitution that guaranteed the rights of the Turkish minority was agreed to. Likewise, government offices were to be divided along ethnic lines.

However, many of the ethnic Greeks did not like the fact that the island was an independent state. Instead, these ethnic Greeks wanted to see the island become a part of the Republic of Greece. Ethnic Greeks favoring union with Greece seized power in a coup on July 15, 1974. The government of Turkey invaded the northern part of the island in order to stop Cyprus from uniting with Greece. The Turkish invasion of Northern Cyprus occurred on July 20, 1974. The Turks used force to expel the ethnic Greeks who were living in the northern part of the island. These ethnic Greeks and their descendants are now mostly living on the southern part of the island and are awaiting a possible return to Northern Cyprus. A number of ethnic Turkish settlers from the mainland have since moved to the Turkish-controlled northern part of the island. As a result of this, Turkey has de facto annexed Northern Cyprus. For example, the Turkish Lira is the currency that is used in Northern Cyprus.

The island (including the capital city) has remained divided ever since the 1974 Turkish invasion. The boundary between the two sides is known as the “Green Line”. The Green Line is maintained by United Nations peacekeeping forces. The Turkish government of Northern Cyprus allowed Greek Cypriots to cross the border that divides the island for the first time since the 1974 invasion in 2003.

There have been a number of attempts at resolving the dispute and ultimately reuniting the island. The most recent one occurred prior to Cyprus’s joining the EU in 2004. However, this United Nations-sponsored plan was rejected by 76% of the Greek Cypriots in a referendum on April 24, 2004. On the same day, the Turkish Cypriots approved this peace plan by a vote of 65% in favor. There has been little to no progress on resolving the dispute since the 2004 referendum, although the new government in the south of the island has made recent attempts to begin a new peace process. As a result, there is now reason to believe that there may soon be a peace settlement.

In addition to Cyprus, there is also the issue of areas which used to be dominated by ethnic Greeks. Most of these areas are in the present-day Republic of Turkey and came under Turkish rule as a result of centuries of Ottoman Turkish possession. The most obvious example is the city of Constantinople (present day İstanbul). Both prior to and after the re-emergence of the Greek state in 1821 many Greeks dreamed of an independent Greek nation-state with Constantinople as its capital. As the Greek state—which re-emerged in 1821—continued to gain more and more territory throughout the 19th century, there was a strong hope that someday Greece would also acquire Constantinople and move its capital there. However, in the early part of the 20th century nearly all of the ethnic Greeks were expelled from Constantinople and the other areas of what is now the European part of the Republic of Turkey. Likewise, many of the coastal areas of Asia Minor where also either majority Greek, or possessed a large Greek minority prior to the beginning of the 20th century. These ethnic Greeks were also expelled and these areas contain very few ethnic Greeks today. As a result, there are very few ethnic Greeks still living in any of these areas. In a theoretical sense, Greater Greece would also include these areas, especially Constantinople. However, most Greeks today realize that that is merely an unattainable dream. Instead, the Greeks are focused on Cyprus.

VII Greater Romania

The concept of Greater Romania is based entirely on Romania absorbing the Republic of Moldova. As is the case with Macedonia, Moldova lacks a national identity: it is in essence a part of the Romanian nation. However, Moldova’s lack of a national identity is even greater than that of Macedonia. For one thing, even though many claim that the Macedonian language is basically a dialect of Bulgarian, it is still generally recognized as being its own language. Likewise, as has been previously mentioned, Bulgarians and Macedonians have different surnames. Finally, one other difference that has not been mentioned up until now is the fact that Bulgaria has not ruled over Macedonia for centuries.

None of this is the case with regards to Moldova and Romania. In one sense, Moldova is basically an extension of Romania, as the Moldovan language is essentially a dialect of Romanian, if it’s even that. During the Soviet era, the Moldovans were forced to write their language with the Cyrillic alphabet. It was not until 1989 that they were permitted to switch back to writing with Latin letters.

In addition to speaking the Romanian language, the Moldovans have also lived within the boundaries of the Romanian state before. In fact, Romania possessed Moldova prior to the Second World War. During the war, the Soviet Union took Moldova—then known as Moldavia—from Romania. Tsarist Russia did once possess the territory of what is now the independent state of Moldova. After the war, Moldova was incorporated into the Soviet Union as the Soviet Socialist Republic of Moldavia, one of the now (after World War Two) fifteen Soviet Socialist Republics. As a result, Moldova became an independent state with the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991. While the bulk of the historical Romanian region of Moldavia is now the present-day Republic of Moldova, a part of this historical region remains with Romania today.

The largely Russian-speaking Trans-Dniester region was incorporated into the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic. Trans-Dniester is a province in the eastern part of Moldova. Unlike most of the rest of the Republic of Moldova—which is largely comprised of ethnic Romanians— Trans-Dniester is largely comprised of ethnic Russians and some ethnic Ukrainians. The population of Trans-Dniester is approximately 700,000. At the time, the fact that Trans-Dniester was a part of a predominately Romanian-speaking republic was of little consequence since the central Russian-speaking authorities held so much power of the whole of the Soviet Union.

However, with the break-up of the Soviet Union, Trans-Dniester was now going to be ruled by a Romanian-speaking state. Worse yet, to many of the Russian-speakers in Trans-Dniester, there was (at least at the time) some talk of the now independent Republic of Moldova joining Romania. If this were to happen, the Russian-speakers in Trans-Dniester would comprise a small percentage of the population within Romania. Indeed, the ethnic Russians of Trans-Dniester would not even be the largest minority group within Romania.

Little progress has ever been made with regards to reunification with Romania. In fact, the Moldovan government has consistently rejected the idea of joining Romania. However, the Romanian government has offered Romanian citizenship to Moldovans, and a large percentage of Moldovans has received Romanian citizenship, a fact that has somewhat disturbed the Moldovan government. Also, it is important to remember that reunification with Romania may become increasingly popular now that Romania is a member of both NATO and the European Union. After all, at this point joining Romania would—to many Moldovans—simply mean seeing their state unite with another state in which they already have citizenship. Moreover, when compared to Moldova, Romania is a far more prosperous state. In short, even though there is little discussion of Moldova joining Romania as of now, there is a fairly strong possibility that such talk could become prevalent in the future.

As a result of all of this, many of the ethnic Russians decided that their best option was to break-away from Moldova. Consequently, Trans-Dniester declared independence from Moldova shortly after Moldova itself had declared independence from the Soviet Union.

A short war broke out between the two sides. The war ended with a cease-fire agreement in July of 1992. Currently the Moldovan government has no control of Trans-Dniester. Instead, there are Russian soldiers patrolling Trans-Dniester and Trans-Dniester has become a de facto oblast of the Russian Federation. The currency that is used in Trans-Dniester is called the coupon and it is pegged to the Russian Ruble. As has been the case with Europe’s other break-away regions, there has been little progress with regards to reaching a final settlement with regards to Trans-Dniester.

VIII Greater Macedonia

Just as there is a concept of Greater Bulgaria which would mainly involve absorbing most or all of the Republic of Macedonia, there is also the concept of Greater Macedonia, which would involve the Republic of Macedonia absorbing parts of southwestern Bulgaria. In many ways parts of southwestern Bulgaria resemble Macedonia more than they resemble the rest of Bulgaria. For example, many people there speak a Bulgarian dialect that is closer to Macedonian than Bulgarian. Also, many of the people in these parts of Bulgaria have surnames that are more Macedonian than Bulgaria. In many ways, the current border between Bulgaria and Macedonia is actually a compromise between the concept of Greater Bulgaria and the idea of a Slavic Macedonian nation! It must be stated that the reason that Bulgaria does not possess Macedonia is because of the fact that the then Kingdom of Serbia managed to acquire what is now the Republic of Macedonia from the retreating Ottoman Empire. It is also important to note that just as there is not a large movement in Bulgaria to create Greater Bulgaria, there is also not a large movement in Macedonia to create Greater Macedonia.

IX Conclusions

As one can see, there are a number of greater nations on the Balkan Peninsula. This is interesting when one considers the fact that the majority of the Balkan states—indeed, most European states in general—are nation-states. Likewise, there are few if any stateless nations on the Balkans. It therefore seems strange that there would be so many greater nations on the Balkans.

There are several reasons why there are so many greater nations on the Balkans. First of all, there is the existence of several nations whose national identity is in question. The best example of this is Macedonia. Is there a separate Macedonian national identity or are the Macedonians merely an extension of the Bulgarians?

In the same vein, how many different national identities were there within the former Yugoslavia? While most would agree that the Slovenians and the Macedonians—whether they are Bulgarians or not—have national identities separate from those of the other Slavs of the former Yugoslavia, the situation is not so clear with regards to the other Slavic nationalities within the former Yugoslavia. In one sense, one could make the argument that they were all a part of the same “Serbo-Croatian” nation. After all, many linguists would argue that there is only one Serbo-Croatian language, albeit with two different alphabets and some dialectical differences. The differences were therefore more based on religion than language. However, it is possible to have separate national identities based on religion rather than language.

However, even if this is the case that would not in and of itself explain a separate Montenegrin national identity. In that case though, perhaps a Montenegrin national identity—separate from that of a Serbian identity—could be based on the existence of a clan system in Montenegro and the absence of one in Serbia.

Another reason why there are so many greater nations on the Balkans is that many of these states emerged following the break-up of empires and larger states. In a little over a century the Austrian-Hungarian, and Ottoman empires, along with Yugoslavia, have all ceased to exist. The internal boundaries of these empires/state were not drawn along ethnic lines. Indeed, in the case of Yugoslavia if anything they were drawn to prevent a break-up.

Another reason is that it was not always easy to draw a line on a map and split two groups. After all, while they may have often times lived in separate villages and towns, these villages and towns were often scattered about and could not be neatly separated.

Therefore, while most if not all of the nations on the Balkans ended up with their own nation-state, and the majority if not most of the Balkan states are nation-states, it is not always the case that the borders were drawn to reflect where the various nations were/are living. In addition, there is also the belief that certain nations have the right to possess certain pieces of land within their nation-states, even if there are no longer many member of that nation still living on the land in question.

All of this can and does lead to conflicts over borders. It is these conflicts which are at the heart of the drive to create these greater nations. Generally speaking, the world’s established states are against changing the world’s borders, largely for the want of avoiding chaos. However, that should not mean that these attempts to create greater nations should be seen as illegitimate, provided that they are conducted purely through peaceful and democratic means.

In the end though, this whole issue could largely become a moot point. The reason is that all of the states of the Balkan Peninsula wish to become full members of the European Union. Indeed, Greece, Romania, Bulgaria, and Slovenia are already members. With things such as open borders, a common currency, a common citizenship, and free movement of people, the significance of these borders diminishes greatly.

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1. This statement should not be taken as a definite belief that Kosovo has become an independent state. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Generally speaking, the term “president” is usually only applied to the leader of a fully independent state rather than to the leader of an autonomous territory. However, the use of the terms such as “president” and “prime minister” should not be seen as a definite belief that Kosovo has managed to become an independent state. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In this instance “the Macedonian part of the Balkan Peninsula” roughly refers to the general areas of present-day Northern Greece and Macedonia. As a general term, it does not have fixed boundaries. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. It is important to note that references to “ethnic Albanians” refer solely to ethnic Albanians who have been living in northern Greece for generations and not to Albanians who have recently migrated to Greece from Albania Proper. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. As was also the case with Greece, “ethnic Albanians” refers solely to the descendants of ethnic Albanians who fled to these areas centuries ago in order to escape Turkish rule and therefore does not refer to Albanians from either Albania Proper or Greater Albania who have recently moved to these areas. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. It is debatable as to whether the Serbians and the Montenegrins are truly two distinct ethnic groups or merely a distinct group of ethnic Serbians. The use of the term “ethnic” with regards to Serbians and Montenegrins should not be seen as definite support for the belief that Serbians and Montenegrins constitute two distinct ethnic groups, as the aim here is to be neutral in that regard. It is merely a term of convenience to distinguish between “Serbian” and “Montenegrin” with regards to place of residence as opposed to “Serbian” and “Montenegrin” with regards to other distinguishing characteristics. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)