

# National identity and the 'other'

Anna Triandafyllidou

## Abstract

This article explores the role of others in the (re-)definition of national identity. A brief review of dominant theories of nationalism shows that the existence of the 'other' is an implicit assumption made by most scholars. Nevertheless, the relationship between the nation and the other remains largely unexplored. However, national identity is defined not only from within, namely from the features that fellow-nationals share in common but also from without, that is, through distinguishing and differentiating the nation from other nations or ethnic groups. National identity becomes meaningful only through the contrast with others. This article introduces the notion of 'significant others' to investigate the ways in which others may condition the formation or lead to a transformation of the identity of the ingroup. The Macedonian question and the emergence of a new Greek nationalism is used as a case-study to highlight the role of significant others in shaping the identity of the nation.

**Keywords:** Nation; nationalism; 'other'; Greece; Macedonia.

## Introduction

Despite its long-prophesied demise the nation remains the most pertinent form of collective identity nowadays. The basic propositions of the nationalist doctrine, namely that the world is divided into nations and that the nation is the only legitimate source of political power, are accepted as uncontested principles which guide the development of social and political life. Not only does the organization of the world in nation-states seem 'natural' but the whole perception by each individual of the surrounding world is based on the distinction between the ingroup, namely the nation, and the foreigners, those belonging to other communities, the 'others'.

The double-edged character of national identity, namely its capacity of defining who is a member of the community but also who is a foreigner, compels one to ask to which extent it is a form of inward-looking self-consciousness of a given community or the extent to which the self-conception of the nation in its unity, autonomy and uniqueness is

conditioned from outside, namely through defining who is *not* a national and through differentiating the ingroup from others.

The notion of the other is inherent in the nationalist doctrine itself. For nationalists (or simply for those individuals who recognizes themselves as members of a national community) the existence of their own nation presupposes the existence of other nations too. Moreover, as history and Ernest Gellner (1983, p. 58), teach us, the course of true nationalism never did run smooth. Thus, most of the nations existing today had to fight to secure their survival and to achieve their independence. For most national communities, there have been and there probably still are significant others, other nations and/or states, from which the community tried to liberate and/or differentiate itself. The question that I want to investigate in this study is the role that such 'others' play in the formation and transformation of national identity.

From a theoretical viewpoint, this study aims at investigating the role of the other in (re-)defining and transforming national identity. The work of some of the most prominent scholars of nationalism will be reviewed in an effort to show that although the existence of the other as part and parcel of the definition of the nation is widely accepted, the relationship between the other and the nation has not yet been investigated in depth. A new perspective from which to consider the nation will be proposed in order to take into account its double-edged, that is, inclusive-exclusive, nature. Indeed, for the nation to exist, it is presupposed that there is some other community, some other nation, from which it needs to distinguish itself. The nation thus has to be understood as a part of a dual relationship rather than as an autonomous, self-contained unit. Moreover, I shall argue that the identity of a nation is defined and/or re-defined through the influence of 'significant others', namely other nations or ethnic groups that are perceived to threaten the nation, its distinctiveness, authenticity and/or independence.

This theoretical section will be complemented by a case-study on Greece and the Macedonian question. I shall thus seek to illustrate the ways in which the identity of a nation may be conditioned, re-defined and/or transformed by the presence of another national community which threatens, or is perceived to threaten, the ingroup. Thus, the ways in which the presence of a significant other influences the definition and indeed the self-conception of a nation will be highlighted.

## **Definitions**

Nationalism and, indeed, the nation itself appear in an ever greater diversity of forms and configurations, changing and constantly reinventing the phenomena that scholars have meticulously tried to fit into analytical categories. However, even though no definition may appear completely satisfactory given the complexity and multi-dimensionality of national

identity, a working definition is necessary for constructing a theoretical framework.

For the purposes of this research, I shall use the definition of the nation elaborated by Anthony Smith. According to Smith (1991, p. 14), a nation is 'a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members'. To this arguably elaborate and useful definition, I shall add an element emphasized by Connor (1978; 1993), namely, the essentially irrational, psychological bond that binds fellow nationals together and which is supposed to constitute the essence of national identity. This psychological bond is usually termed 'a sense of belonging' (Connor 1978) or 'a fellow feeling' (Geertz 1963). Such expressions point to the close link established between the individual and the collective self, namely the nation.

In order to analyse national identity as a concept and/or as a social phenomenon it is often necessary to study the movement that brings nations into being, namely nationalism. The latter is defined as the 'ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity and identity on behalf of a population deemed by some of its members to constitute an actual or potential nation' (Smith 1991, p. 73).<sup>1</sup>

Finally, before proceeding to the main argument of this work, it is important to provide a definition of the nationalist doctrine (cf. Smith 1991, p. 74; Kedourie 1992, p. 67). This doctrine contains three fundamental propositions. First, the world is divided into nations. Each nation has its own culture, history and destiny that make it unique among other nations. Second, each individual belongs to a nation. Allegiance to the nation overrides all other loyalties. Moreover, individuals who are nationless cannot fully realize themselves and, furthermore, in the world of nations they are social and political outcasts. Third, nations must be united, autonomous and free to pursue their goals. This third proposition actually implies that the nation is the only legitimate source of social and political power.

The nationalist doctrine celebrates the universalism of the particular. Not only does each nation deem itself to be unique but it also asserts that the world is made up of nations, all of equal worth and value because they are all unique. Moreover, all nations have the inalienable right to self-determination. Of course, in reality, it often happens that the autonomy of one nation is put in question or, indeed, denied by another nation(-state). Hence, conflict may arise between two national communities with regard to the 'ownership' of territory, cultural traditions, myths or heroes. However, the doctrine itself is clear: the world is divided into nations and all of them enjoy the same rights.

This feature of the doctrine is important for the discussion that will follow because it highlights the fact that the existence of 'others' is an element inherent in national identity and, indeed, in nationalism itself.

Nationalism does not only assert the existence of the specific national community. It also assigns it a position in a world of other separate and unique nations from which the ingroup must be distinguished.

### **The nation and the other**

The notion of the 'other' is inextricably linked to the concept of national identity. The opposition to the other is taken as an intrinsic feature of nationalism in most theories even though the influence that the other has in the definition of national identity remains largely unexplored. Elie Kedourie in his influential book (1992, pp. 44–55) highlights the importance assigned to diversity by the nationalist doctrine: 'There is a duty laid upon us to cultivate our own peculiar qualities and *not mix or merge them with others*' (ibid., p. 51, emphasis added). Indeed, the quest for authenticity of the national self is inseparable from the conception of others. Moreover, Kedourie argues that one of the main problems deriving from the application of the national principle in politics is that it 'cannot be deduced what particular nations exist and what their precise limits are' (ibid., p. 75). Thus, the whole argument of nationalists seems to be reduced to the fundamental question of defining the 'we' and the 'they'.

The other also plays an important part in Gellner's account of nationalism (1964; 1983). In *Thought and Change* (1964, pp. 167–71), he suggests that the awareness of a shared nationality on the part of the population of a backward region is initially based on a negative trait: their *exclusion* from the 'nation' of the privileged. Even though he states that nationalism 'does need some pre-existing differentiating marks to work on' (ibid., p. 168), these may be purely negative. But if the aim of the Ruritians is to differentiate themselves from the inhabitants of Megalomania, this *must* bear some effect on the development of their identity. Indeed, according to Gellner, common habits or traditions of the Ruritians become significant because they provide a basis for identification *in contrast* to the privileged Megalomanians.<sup>2</sup>

Even though Anthony Smith's theory (1981; 1986; 1991) concentrates on the ethnic origins of nations, he also refers to the importance of symbolic or real 'others' for the shaping of national identity. He argues that in the context of the philosophical and historical discourses developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe, identity is conceptualized as sameness (Smith 1991, p. 75). In other words, the members of one community have a number of features in common, for example, language or dress code, which constitute the markers of their identity. 'Others' differ from the members of the community precisely in these features, they speak a different language for instance or they have a different dress style. Even though Smith agrees that 'this pattern of similarity-cum-dissimilarity is one meaning of national identity' (ibid.), he does not consider that there might be an interaction between the two. Do the members of the

community come together because of their common language, tradition or cultural codes? Or do they, like the Ruritarians, become aware of their common features only as a means of differentiating themselves from a significant, perhaps a privileged Megalomanian, other?<sup>3</sup>

In developing my argument with regard to the role of 'others' in the definition of national identity, I shall draw upon the concept of national identity proposed by Walker Connor (1978; 1993) and the theory of nationalism and social communication developed by Karl Deutsch (1966). In Connor's view, objective criteria like culture and religion are insufficient to define which group constitutes a nation. Therefore, the concept of nationality cannot be operationalized in terms of specific characteristics such as geographical location, religious composition or linguistic homogeneity. These are important only to the degree to which they reinforce national identity (Connor 1978, p. 389). Moreover, they may be subject to changes without however a group's losing its sense of autonomy and uniqueness that make it a nation.

Connor introduces one feature which, according to him, characterizes all nations and which constitutes the intangible essence of nationality: the belief in common descent. He stresses that the psychological bond that brings co-nationals together is based on their common conviction that they are ethnically related. This, of course, is not an objective criterion: members of a nation need not be ancestrally related. The important thing is that they believe they are (Connor 1993, pp. 376–77). This belief leads to a dichotomous conception of the world. The national bond divides humanity into 'us', fellow nationals and the 'others', non-members of 'our' community (*ibid.*, p. 386).

Connor's definition of nationality may be criticized because it is unilaterally focused on ethnicity and therefore fails to account for the existence of territorial or civic nations. His contribution is, however, of great significance because he stresses *the* fundamental feature that characterizes both ethnic and territorial nationalisms, namely, the fact that national identity, irrational and subjective though it may be, induces a dichotomous view of the world. Belonging to a nation does not only imply knowing who 'we' are but also recognizing who are the 'others'.<sup>4</sup>

None the less, contrary to Connor's argument, I believe that concrete elements like culture, religion or language are important not only to the degree that they reinforce the nation's identity but because they differentiate the ingroup from the outgroup and thus justify and make *real* this divided view of the world. Cultural traits, myths, traditions, historical territories form an integral part of the distinction between 'us' and 'them'. They give to the contrast between the nation and the 'others' a concrete form and, at the same time, they are shaped by this contrast so that they further reinforce it. Thus, linguistic differences justify claims of belonging to separate nations while dialects that originate from the same language are developed in opposite directions so that their differences

are accentuated. The case of the Serbian-Croat dialects offers an eloquent example of such processes (cf. Irvine 1993). Besides, collective memories of a historical event, say a battle, are reinterpreted in ways that emphasize the contrast between the ingroup and the outgroup. The conquest of Constantinople by the Ottomans in 1453, for instance, symbolizes for the Greeks the age-long struggle between Greeks and Turks and the intrinsically evil nature of the latter. Furthermore, cultural elements may be revived in order to accentuate the distinction between 'us' and 'them'. Thus, the Irish language, although replaced by English in everyday communication in Ireland, has been made a symbol of the uniqueness and authenticity of the Irish nation and has emphasized its distinctiveness from the British.

Arguing, however, that national identity leads to a generalized divided perception of the world is not sufficient to make explicit the role that the 'other' plays in the (re-)definition of national identity. In order to show that the conception of the 'other' is a functional element intrinsic to the notion of nationality, I shall use the definition of national identity developed by Karl Deutch (1966).

Deutsch argues that the nation can be defined in functional terms. Membership of a national community consists in the ability to communicate more effectively with fellow nationals than with outsiders (Deutsch 1966, p. 97). This is actually the fundamental quality of a nation: 'peoples are held together "from within" by this communicative efficiency' (ibid., p. 98). Moreover, the more effective a system of social communication is, the more separate it becomes from those groups that it cannot incorporate: 'unable to bear promiscuity, it must choose marriage or divorce' (ibid., p. 175).

The element that is important to retain from Deutsch's work is his functional view of the nation. In his view, members of the national community are characterized by their ability to communicate with one another *better than* they do with outsiders. Nationality, from this functional perspective, is not an absolute concept. It means that members share with one another *more than* they share with foreigners. This definition of the nation involves necessarily the concept of otherness. The nation is a group of people who share with one another more things in common than they share with outsiders. Thus, for the nation to exist there must be some outgroup against which the unity and homogeneity of the ingroup is tested.

Nationalist activists and also scholars of nationalism tend to consider national identity as an absolute relationship. Either it exists or it does not. Either a group of people share some specific features, be they civic or ethnic in character, that make of them a nation or they do not. However, in the light of my analysis this argument is misleading. National identity expresses a feeling of belonging that has a relative value. It makes sense only to the extent that it is contrasted with the feelings that

members of the nation have towards foreigners. Fellow nationals are not simply very close or close enough to one another, they are *closer* to one another than they are to outsiders.

National identity, thus, may be conceived as a double-edged relationship. On the one hand, it is inward-looking, it involves a certain degree of commonality within the group. It is thus based on a set of common features that bind the members of the nation together. Contrary to Walker Connor's argument, these features cannot be summarized in the belief to common descent. Nor is the national bond equivalent to effective communication as Deutsch suggests. It rather includes a set of elements which range from (presumed) ethnic ties to a shared public culture, common historical memories and links to a homeland and also a common legal and economic system (cf. Smith 1991, p. 14).

On the other hand, national identity implies difference. Its existence presupposes the existence of 'others', other nations or other individuals, who do not belong to the ingroup and from which the ingroup must be distinguished. National consciousness, in other words, renders both commonality and difference meaningful. It involves both self-awareness of the group and awareness of others from which the nation seeks to differentiate itself. This means that national identity has no meaning *per se*. It becomes meaningful in contrast to other nations. This argument is actually implicit in the nationalist doctrine which asserts that there is a plurality of nations.

### **'Significant others'**

The conceptualization of national identity as a double-edged relationship implies that it is defined both internally and externally. From within, the national bond may relate to a belief in common descent and/or to a common culture, namely a system of traditions, ideas, symbols and patterns of behaviour and communication that are shared by the members of the community. Moreover, national identity may be related to a specific territory, the homeland of the nation and also the natural setting in which it can exercise its sovereign powers. Each national identity is usually based on a combination of these elements. For some communities, civic and territorial ties are stronger, whereas for others common ethnicity and cultural affinities are prevalent.

These elements define the nation from within. They constitute a pool of potential identity features. However, identity is always constituted in interaction. Thus, some of these features become salient because they distinguish the ingroup from others, while other features remain latent. In this sense the nation is defined from outside, namely in contrast to other communities. The emphasis assigned to one or other feature of the national identity depends on the characteristics and/or the claims of other groups from which the nation seeks to differentiate itself.

The history of each nation is marked by the presence of significant others that have influenced the development of its identity by means of their 'threatening' presence. The notion of a significant other refers to another nation or ethnic group that is territorially close to, or indeed within, the national community and threatens, or rather is perceived to threaten, its ethnic and/or cultural purity and/or its independence. Even though, throughout the history of a nation more than one nation or ethnic group becomes a salient outgroup, namely a significant other, against which the nation seeks to assert itself and which, in turn, influences its identity. I shall assume that at any one time there is *one* significant other for each nation which affects the formation or transformation of its identity. In other words, the concept of the significant other will be based in the conflict between contrasted poles: the ingroup and the outgroup.

A 'significant other' need not be a stronger or larger nation or a community with more resources than the ingroup. The feature that makes some other group a 'significant other' is the fact that it is perceived to pose a threat to the existence of the nation. This threat may concern the nation's independence and self-determination, that is, the 'significant other' may be a nation that is in conflict with the ingroup because of a territorial or ethnic dispute.

However, the significant other may also be a group that threatens to blur the distinctiveness of the ingroup. Thus, it may be a group that is culturally related to the nation and therefore puts in question the authenticity of its identity. Indeed, according to social-psychological research on group behaviour, the strongest competition between two groups may be expected to occur where in reality there is the least reason to distinguish one group from the other (Turner 1975, p. 22). Identity implies both uniqueness and the recognition of similarity between the members of the group which makes the uniqueness meaningful. Thus, Lemaine *et al.* (1978, p. 287) argues that 'a threatened identity can (. . .) be restored by means of a search for difference and otherness, the creation of, and then the emphasis upon, heterogeneity'. It may therefore happen that a neighbouring group which shares a set of cultural traditions and/or historical experiences with the nation is perceived as a significant other because it threatens the sense of distinctiveness and uniqueness of the latter.

Significant others may be distinguished between those that belong to the same political entity with the ingroup, namely they are *internal* others and those that form a separate political unit and, in this sense, are *external* significant others (see Table 1). Following this distinction, for a nation which is in possession of its own state or which forms the dominant national majority within a quasi-nation-state,<sup>5</sup> an internal significant other may be an ethnic minority or an immigrant community. Similarly, for a nation which forms part of a larger multinational political unit, the internal significant other may be either the national majority or some

other small nation within the state or, finally, an immigrant community. With regard to external significant others, a nation which is organized in a nation-state or forms part of a multinational state may perceive as a significant other another nation, be it in possession of a state or forming part of a multinational polity or an ethnic community which makes up part of a larger political unit.

Ethnic minorities that have participated in the constitution of the state within which the ingroup forms the national majority may become significant others for the latter. Such minorities usually have distinct culture, language, traditions and myths of origin from the dominant nation and may therefore be perceived by the dominant nation to pose a threat either to the territorial integrity of its quasi nation-state, if they raise secessionist claims, or to its cultural unity and authenticity, when they assert their right to difference and thus disrupt the cultural and political order of the quasi nation-state.

The second type of internal significant others refers to immigrant communities. These may become internal significant others when their different language, religion or mores are perceived to threaten the cultural and/or ethnic purity of the nation. The nation is likely then to engage in a process of reaffirmation of its identity and seek to re-define it so as to differentiate the ingroup from the newcomers.

Thirdly, a small nation existing within a larger multinational state may perceive as internal significant others either the dominant nation, or some other small nation or, finally, an immigrant community. The dynamics of the contrast between a small nation and the dominant national community may involve the quest for political autonomy on the part of the small nation or its search for distinctiveness. This contrast

**Table 1.** *Internal and external significant others*

	INTERNAL		EXTERNAL	
<i>Ingroup:</i>	Nation with nation-state	Nation in multinational state	Nation with nation-state	Nation in multinational state
<i>Element contested by the significant other:</i>				
<i>CULTURE</i>	ethnic minority immigrant community	ethnic minority immigrant community small nation dominant nation	rival nation	dominant nation dominant ethnic group rival nation
<i>TERRITORY</i>	ethnic minority	ethnic minority small nation dominant nation	rival nation	dominant nation dominant ethnic group rival nation

often serves in the demarcation of the territorial or cultural/symbolic boundaries of the small nation by accentuating those features that distinguish it from the majority. In other words, the contrast to the significant other shapes the identity of the ingroup.

Moreover, a small nation may perceive as an internal significant other another small nation or an immigrant community. With regard to the former, the rivalry and contrast between the two may involve competition for resources available from the centralized state, or it may regard competing territorial or cultural claims. A small nation may also define its identity in contrast to an immigrant community which is perceived as a threat to the purity and authenticity of the nation because of its alien language, mores, or religion.

With regard to external significant others, three types can be distinguished. The first type which is particularly relevant to the initial stages of nation formation, is the dominant nation or ethnic group of a multinational state from which the ingroup seeks to liberate and/or distinguish itself. Indeed, the identity of the new nation is shaped in contrast to such a group (cf. Gellner 1964; 1983). Its main features are those that distinguish it from the dominant nation or ethnic group. Moreover, the struggle for liberation further accentuates the contrast between the two: the new nation is what the dominant nation or ethnic group is not.

The second type of external significant others concerns rival nations (or nation-states), neighbours of the ingroup, which contest some part of the ingroup's homeland or which are in possession of lands that the ingroup claims to be part of its own territory, namely the nation's irredenta. This type of external significant other may lead to the re-definition of the territorial boundaries of the nation or it may accentuate its irredentist tendencies and emphasize a specific ethnic or cultural conception of the ingroup which supports such tendencies.

Finally, the third type of external significant others that needs to be distinguished are nations, nation-states or ethnic groups which are territorially close to the ingroup but do not contest its territorial boundaries. Rather, they raise claims to the ingroup's cultural heritage by means of asserting that specific myths, symbols and/or ancestors are part of their national past. They thus threaten the ingroup's sense of uniqueness and authenticity. The ingroup may therefore be led to re-define its identity in order to assert that the contested symbols or myths are its own cultural *property*.

In distinguishing between these two types, namely external and internal significant others, and further sub-types within them, my aim is to highlight the different conflict dynamics that are developed between the nation and the significant other, and the ways in which these condition the development of national identity. More particularly, internal significant others (are perceived to) erode the unity and/or authenticity of the nation from 'within', while external significant others (are deemed

to) challenge the territorial and/or cultural integrity of the nation from without. Thus, the external significant other is easily recognizable as the other, identifiable with another state and so its contrast to the nation must be seen in the context of international relations. The external significant other is perceived to threaten the very position of the nation in the world of nations (and nation-states) because it challenges its distinctiveness and its right to self-determination. The relationship between the nation and an internal significant other, in contrast, forms part of identity politics within a state. The internal significant other disrupts the cultural and political order of the nation, and thus challenges its sense of unity and authenticity. In other words, the external significant other is perceived as threatening to 'wipe out' the nation, while the internal significant other is viewed as threatening to 'contaminate' it.

The nations or ethnic communities which fall under one of the types of significant others defined above should be seen as *potential* significant others. These are groups that due to their being close to (or indeed within) the national territory and/or because they contest some of the features of the national identity of the ingroup, represent potential threats to the nation. However, they only become significant others when their threatening presence becomes salient. This happens during periods of instability and crisis, when the territorial and symbolic boundaries of the ingroup are unstable and/or unclear. Significant others, for instance, are identified during the phase of nation formation when national identity is still in the making. They thus serve at strengthening the sense of belonging of the ingroup and demarcating its territorial, ethnic or cultural boundaries.

Significant others also become salient in periods of social, political or economic crisis during which the identity of the nation is put in question. The significant other in these cases serves in overcoming the crisis because it unites the people in front of a common enemy, it reminds them 'who we are' and emphasizes that 'we are different and unique'. In times of crisis, the significant other serves also as a scapegoat (cf. Doob 1964, p. 253). In either case, the significant other becomes the lever for the transition towards a new identity. Through the confrontation with the significant other the identity of the ingroup is transformed in ways that make it relevant under a new set of circumstances and/or respond better to the emotive and/or material needs of the members of the nation.

If it is the national identity that is contested, the significant other helps to clarify the boundaries of the ingroup and to reinforce its members' sense of belonging. If, in contrast, the nation undergoes a period of general economic or socio-political crisis, the significant other provides for a 'distraction' from the real causes of the crisis. Moreover, it is a means for reasserting the positive identity of the nation against the odds.<sup>6</sup>

**Greece and the Macedonian question: a case-study**

The Macedonian question and the re-emergence of Greek nationalism will be taken up as a case-study to show how and why the Former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia [FYROM] has represented an external significant other for Greece in the period 1991-1993 and the effect that this has had on Greek national identity.

The phrase 'Macedonian question' has been widely used over the past century to refer to political conflict and warfare in the Balkan peninsula, focusing on the geographical region of Macedonia. The use of this phrase here, however, is confined to the contemporary issues raised by Greece after the proclamation of independence by FYROM in 1991. The conflict between the two countries over the name of the new Republic is part of a 'global cultural war' (Featherstone 1990, p. 10) that the two states have been fighting over the control of symbols, traditions and glorious ancestors. According to the decision of the United Nations [UN], despite its recognition as an independent state, FYROM has not been able officially to use its flag because this would 'offend' the nationalist feelings of the Greek people. The new state has been assigned the name FYROM by the UN, despite its discontent. This decision has resulted from a series of official protests on the part of the Greek government, which imposed a veto within the European Union [EU] and the UN so that the 'Republic of Skopje', as Greeks call it, would not be recognized as 'Macedonia' *tout-court*.

The aim of this section will be to show how the transformation of the ex-Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia into a nation-state has been perceived by Greece as a challenge to its cultural distinctiveness and territorial integrity. The claim of FYROM over the 'Macedonian' cultural heritage has led Greeks to incorporate Alexander the Great into the classical Greek tradition and emphasize his centrality to the Greeks' sense of identity.

*Nationalist politics and cultural property*

The Socialist Republic of Macedonia existed previously as a federal state within Yugoslavia. After the dismantling of the Yugoslav federation and in accordance with the will of the people living in the republic, as expressed in the referendum of 8 September 1991, an independent and sovereign state was established. Thus, the name 'Macedonia' has come to describe not a political unit subordinated to a federation of several national communities, but a nation-state.

Naming is a fundamental expression of political power because to name something means to bring it into existence (Bourdieu 1991, p. 236). As if to confirm Bourdieu's argument, Greece has strongly opposed the use of the name 'Macedonia' by the new Republic. According to the

claims of the Greek government, the use of the name implied the overall appropriation of the symbols, traditions, myths and even the territory (including the Greek region of Macedonia) associated with the name 'Macedonia'.

Greece has also opposed the use of the FYROM flag because it bears the image of the star of Vergina. This 'star', or 'sunburst' as it is often called, was discovered in the mid-1970s at Vergina, a monumental site in the south-west of Thessaloniki, capital of the Greek region of Macedonia, and is considered to be the emblem of the empire of Alexander the Great.<sup>7</sup> The Greek government has pointed out the oddness of a flag which represents the national identity of a people, that is, the 'Macedonians', by evoking the national tradition and cultural heritage of another nation, namely the Greeks. The argument is based on the specific political role assigned to cultural symbols within the nation-state. These are supposed to represent the continuity and unity of the national community through history. The 'Macedonian' flag and the very name of the state have therefore been judged contradictory by the Greeks.

However, Dimaras (1982) points out that in the early stages of the emergence of the Greek nation-state, there were contradictory views with regard to the 'Hellenicity' of the cultural heritage of Alexander the Great and his dynasty. Indeed, strictly speaking, Macedonians were not included in the classical Greek tradition. As a matter of fact, according to Politis (1991–92, p. 5, cited in Karakasidou 1994, p. 41), popular perceptions during the nineteenth century held that the population of the Greek peninsula had been struggling for independence from *foreign domination ever since the ancient Greeks had been conquered by the Macedonian armies in 338 BC* (emphasis added). Moreover, ancient Greeks, Athenians in particular, saw Philip and Alexander as foreign invaders rather than as fellow kinsmen. Even though Alexander and his legacy have been progressively incorporated into the national past during the last century,<sup>8</sup> they do not constitute *the* fundamental element of Greek identity and cultural heritage. The claims of FYROM, however, its 'threatening' to appropriate that part of the national past and culture which referred to Alexander, have activated Greek nationalism and led to the re-definition of national identity: Alexander has become a core element of Greekness. In other words, the national past has been reinterpreted under the pressure of FYROM's claims. The 'Macedonian' part of the Greek cultural heritage has become increasingly important for the self-conception of the nation during the past few years because it was challenged by another nation(-state).

Besides, the Macedonian question coincided with a period of economic and socio-political crisis for Greece. The rather poor results of the Greek economy during the previous decade had cast doubt on the country's participation in the EU. Moreover, Greece was recovering from a long period of governmental crisis during which the credibility of

the main Greek political parties had been seriously questioned (cf. Triandafyllidou 1997, pp. 11–22). During this difficult period, the supposed cultural and territorial threat of FYROM offered an opportunity, perhaps the only one, for the nation to regain its positive self-identity.

Thus, the nationalist feelings of the Greek population have been manipulated by political parties as a campaigning device, namely as a means of discrediting one another while keeping the voters' attention away from internal economic and social problems. A conservative government initially and later a socialist government stimulated nationalist sentiments and, simultaneously, acted to disorient the electorate in a period of economic and political crisis (cf. Triandafyllidou *et al.* 1997). National pride was systematically emphasized in a political discourse which concentrated on the 'injustice' caused by 'foreigners', that is, FYROM or the international community to 'our' nation.

### *Greek identity re-defined*

The extreme sensibility of Greece with regard to the Macedonian question is related to the prominent role given to the past in the definition of Greek identity. Traditions, myths and collective memories, in particular those associated with national struggles against 'invaders' or 'enemies', real or imagined, have played a prominent role in the formation of the Greek nation. Since the achievement of national independence in 1821, the nation has been defined with reference to common ancestry (Kitromilides 1983; Veremis 1983, 1990), culture and language (Kitromilides 1990, p. 30). Its historical trajectory has been traced in a linear form from antiquity to modernity. Any discontinuities that have marked the history of the national community have been reinterpreted so that the nation is eventually represented as a homogeneous and compact unit.

Greekness has been inextricably related to common ancestry, cultural traditions and religion. Any diversity within the Greek state has been eradicated through a policy of systematic Hellenization of the populations inhabiting the Greek peninsula (cf. Kitromilides 1983; Karakasi-dou 1993; Mackridge and Yannakakis 1997). Greek national identity was reconstructed through the territorialization and politicization of ethnic and cultural traditions. Ethnic customs, linguistic ties and religious beliefs were transformed into national sentiments, while local or regional diversity was to a large extent suppressed.

Thus, any questioning of the national symbols and myths, of the 'Hellenicity' of Alexander the Great in particular, is (perceived as) a threat to the very essence of the nation not only because it casts doubt on its continuity through history but also because it threatens to bring to the surface ethnic or cultural diversities that were eradicated by means of their exclusion from the public domain and their forceful assimilation to a homogeneous national culture. The political and cultural claims of

FYROM have thus been perceived as threatening not only the distinctiveness and uniqueness of the Greek nation but also its very existence.

The location of FYROM within the geographical district of Macedonia, adjacent to the Greek region with the same name, and its claims on what was perceived by the Greeks as 'their' national heritage<sup>9</sup> transformed the new republic into a 'significant other' for Greece.<sup>10</sup> To counteract these claims, Greece emphasized its cultural and ethnic unity and continuity. Furthermore, it played down any political or territorial features which might reveal discontinuities of the national past, in particular, the fact that the Greek region of Macedonia was incorporated into the independent Greek state only at the beginning of this century (cf. Clogg 1992). The Greek government and most Greek intellectuals (cf. Karakasidou 1994) tacitly ignored the fact that the indigenous Slavic-speaking population of the Greek region of Macedonia was subjected to forceful Hellenization during the first half of this century (cf. Karakasidou 1993; Mackridge and Yannakakis 1997, chs 2–3 and 5–8 in particular). The Slavo-Macedonian cultural heritage was perceived as antagonistic to Greek national identity. For this reason it was suppressed, and the Slav-speaking populations were obliged to assimilate both culturally and ethnically to the dominant Greek nation (cf. Karakasidou 1997; Mackridge and Yannakakis 1997).

Not surprisingly, the government's initiatives with regard to the 'defence' of the nation from the 'Skopjans' (as Greeks used to call FYROM) were successful in mobilizing Greek citizens at home and abroad. The nationalist movement that emerged as a result of the Macedonian question has had a double effect. On the one hand, it has led to the reinterpretation of the national past so that Alexander has become an integral and uncontested part of the ancient Greek legacy. On the other hand, it has put further emphasis on the ethno-cultural basis of Greek national identity. In order to face FYROM's challenge, the Greek government has launched a nationalist campaign, with the diachronic character of Greekness as its fundamental feature. According to this view, the boundary between Greeks and non-Greeks has persisted throughout the centuries from Alexander the Great until the present time.

The analysis of the Macedonian question and the emergence of a new Greek nationalism suggest that national identity is not merely a matter of reinventing or re-discovering the ethnic and civic ties that bind the nation together. It is also shaped by significant others that (are perceived to) threaten the nation's cultural distinctiveness and/or political independence.

## **Conclusions**

The aim of this article has been to discuss the nature of national identity as a 'feeling of belonging' developed within a group of people. More

particularly, it has sought to clarify the extent to which national identity can be defined as the self-awareness of a community that shares a number of features in common or the extent to which nationhood is externally defined through a process of differentiation from and in contrast to others. Greece and its cultural and diplomatic 'war' with FYROM have been used as a case-study in order to highlight the role that others may play in the shaping of national identity.

Dominant theories and definitions regarding the nature of national identity and the processes that have led to the emergence of modern nations have been discussed in the article. Indeed, scholars identify a variety of elements as the main features of national identity which distinguish it from other types of collective identities. Walker Connor, for instance, points to the belief in common ancestry as the main feature that gives to national identity its peculiar, irrational character. Anthony Smith, on the other hand, draws attention to the ethnic origins of nations. Karl Deutsch develops a functional definition of the nation as a community of efficient communication. Finally, Kedourie sees the nation as an invention of the nineteenth century, while Gellner views nation formation as a consequence of the uneven spread of industrialization and modernization.

Even though these theories adopt different perspectives from which to examine the phenomenon of nationalism, they converge at one point: they all take for granted the existence of others, namely other nations, from which the ingroup seeks to distinguish and differentiate itself. In fact, the existence of other nations is inherent in the nationalist doctrine itself. However, as Kedourie (1991, p. 75) points out, it cannot be deduced from the doctrine of what particular nations exist and what their precise limits are. This is the case with regard to the Macedonian question examined in my case-study. The boundaries between Greeks and the people of FYROM are difficult to trace. Thus, each nationality has to assert its autonomy and uniqueness in contrast to, and often in opposition from, the other.

My contention has been to look at national identity as a double-edged relationship. Not only does it define who is within but also who is outside the national community. National consciousness makes sense only in contrast to some other nation. The history of each nation is marked by the presence of significant others, namely other national communities that by means of their threatening presence have influenced the development of the identity of the ingroup. The notion of a 'significant other' refers to another nation or ethnic group that is geographically close to the national community and is (perceived as) a 'threat' to the nation's authenticity, unity and autonomy.

Modern Greece offers fruitful ground to test this hypothesis because its national identity has been formed through a continuous struggle for national liberation and independence which was often unsuccessful.

Modern Greek identity was shaped in response to the Ottoman occupation and (later also Turkish) threat which has remained alive both in reality and in popular imagination and state ideology until the present day. Nevertheless, other nations too have been conceptualized as significant others by Greeks during their modern history, including Bulgarians, Albanians and most recently 'Slavo-Macedonians', namely the FYROM.

Significant others may be distinguished as internal, namely, those who belong to the same political entity with the ingroup, and as external, namely those that form part of another state. In distinguishing between internal and external significant others, my aim has been to highlight the different conflict dynamics that are developed between the nation and the internal or external significant other. More specifically, internal significant others are (perceived as) a threat to the purity and authenticity of the nation, whereas external significant others (supposedly) threaten its very existence, that is, they threaten to annihilate it.

In reality, internal and external significant others may be connected. Thus, for Greeks, the Turkish minority living in the region of Thrace is sometimes perceived as an internal significant other not only by itself but also, and perhaps most importantly, to the extent that it is related to an external significant other, namely Turkey. Similarly, the re-emergence of a Slavic-speaking population in the Greek region of Macedonia during the past few years and its assertion of minority rights is inextricably linked to the diplomatic relations between Greece and FYROM.

It is worth noting that other nations or ethnic groups which are territorially close to the nation and which (are perceived to) contest its culture, territory or other features of its identity, constitute *potential* significant others. They only become significant others during periods of crisis when their supposedly threatening presence becomes salient. During such periods, the significant other helps in clarifying the boundaries between the nation and the others, and reinforces its members' sense of belonging. Moreover, the contrast to the significant other provides an effective means of reasserting a positive identity for the ingroup that is in crisis. In other words, through the confrontation with the significant other the national identity is re-defined in ways that make it relevant under a new set of circumstances and which respond better to the material, symbolic or affective needs of its members.

This seems to have been the role played by FYROM with regard to Greece in the period 1991–1993. The so-called Macedonian question gave Greeks the opportunity to feel united in face of the common enemy, to reassert their positive sense of identity and thus to overcome the socio-political and economic crisis that the country was undergoing. The conflict, real and perceived, between Greece and this 'new' significant other led to the transformation of the Greek national identity<sup>11</sup> by making Alexander the Great a core element of the classical heritage and so enhancing the sense of continuity and uniqueness of the nation. But the

heritage of Alexander and Philip would not have been given such emphasis, had it not been contested by another nation.

Even though this case-study is particularly interesting in that it highlights the identity dynamics involved in the relationship between the nation and the significant other, further empirical research is needed in order to achieve a better understanding of the ways in which the presence, real or imaginary, of significant others shapes the identity of a nation.

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### **Notes**

1. With regard to definitions of nationalism see also Deutsch (1966) Smith (1971) Connor (1978).
2. Even the similarity of the dialects that impoverished Ruritanians spoke was recognized to the extent that it separated them from those better-off who 'spoke something quite alien' (Gellner 1983, p. 108–109).
3. The relationship between the national identity and the other underlies also the typology of nationalist movements proposed by Smith (1991, p. 82). This typology is based on the distinction between ethnic and territorial nationalisms and their pre- or post-independence context. However, the pre- or post-independence criterion indicates not only the political condition of the specific community, namely its autonomy or subordination to some other nation, but also the simple fact that each nation has to assert itself in contrast, and often in opposition, to another national community. Thus, one latent aspect of this typology is the relationship between the nation and a significant other. The pre- or post-independence condition mainly indicates whether the other is within or outside the territory of the state. Moreover, it is not clear in the typology whether the goals of the movement are derived from the ethnic or territorial character of the nation or whether the nation is conceptualized as an ethnic or a civic community because of the specific context and situation in which the nationalist movement develops. In other words, the argument may seem circular. Is it the need to integrate disparate ethnic populations into the political community of a post-colonial state that leads to a territorial conception of the nation, for instance? Or are the civic and territorial features of the national community which dictate its goals? These arguments may not put in question the validity of the typology as such, they demonstrate, however, that the notion of the 'other' is inextricably linked with the concept of national identity.
4. Connor suggests that in the process of nation formation, a group of people become first aware of what they *are not* ethnically before actually realizing what they *are* (Connor 1978, p. 388, emphasis in the original).
5. I use the term 'quasi nation-state' here to denote states which include a national majority which claims that the state is its own nation-state and one or more ethnic minorities whose collective identities may be more or less recognized. Nowadays many of the states, defined by themselves and others as nation-states, are such quasi nation-states (cf. Connor 1978).

6. Social-psychological research (Tajfel 1979; Tajfel and Turner 1979; Tajfel and Forgas 1981) has shown that social comparison processes, namely, comparison between social groups, serve in achieving and/or maintaining a positive group identity.
7. There is considerable disagreement among scholars regarding the ethnic, national, royal or other meaning of the star of Vergina as well as with regard to Andronikos's argument that the famous gold larnax found in Vergina belonged to the tomb of Philip of Macedon (cf. Triandafyllidou *et al.* 1997).
8. The history of Alexander's empire and the Hellenistic period form an integral part of the national history curricula in the various levels of public education in Greece. Moreover, the ethnic and cultural-linguistic definition of the nation adopted by the independent Greek state in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was based on the diffusion of the Greek language and customs to the farthest borders of the Hellenistic kingdoms (cf. Kitromilides 1983).
9. According to the Greek nationalist view, classical Greek culture is the intellectual *property* of the Greek nation-state (nation and state are here merged) while its geographical and/or cultural neighbours are excluded from this heritage. Culture is thus defined as an object, bounded in time and space and associated as the *property* of a particular community (Handler 1988, p. 142).
10. This argument does not aim at denying that the Ottomans and later the Turks have been for centuries the significant other *par excellence* for Greeks. It aims rather at highlighting why and how FYROM has become the significant other in the period between 1991 and 1993 and how its presence has activated a process of re-definition of Greek national identity.
11. . . . possibly of FYROM's identity too, but this is a different subject that is worth a separate study.

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**ANNA TRIANDAFYLLIDOU** is Marie Curie Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Institute of Psychology, Rome.

ADDRESS: Institute of Psychology, Italian National Research Council (CNR), viale Marx 15, Rome 00137, Italy.