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An interview with political writer Yavor Tarinski for the Greek newspaper Empros on the visions for united Balkans, the communes of history and the possibility of direct democracy today. The Greek version was published in the 21.05.25 issue of the newspaper. The questions were made by Pavlos Maragkos.

Pavlos Maragkos: You are an author that has written extensively on the visions for united Balkans. What was the need that prompted you to research these visions?

Yavor Tarinski: My involvement with the vision of a united Balkans was born out of a deeply personal need: to be able to see our wider region free from the distorting filters of nationalism and patriotism. To rethink the Balkans not as a field of antagonism and conflict, but as a potential place of solidarity and democratic coexistence of peoples.

That is where my quest began. I started collecting stories, events, testimonies of people and experiences of movements that, as early as the 19th century, tried to envision and build such an alternative reality. I was interested not only in highlighting these efforts, but also in understanding the reasons

why they ultimately failed to prevail – even though, in many cases, the conditions for something different existed.

PM: These stories have been suppressed by mainstream historiography and, as you mention, there were revolutionary ideas of federalism and self-management. However, it appears from the outcome that these efforts did not succeed and nationalist ideas became entrenched. Why did this alternative model of governance fail to prevail?

YT: The reasons are many and interrelated. One decisive factor was the role of the Great Powers of the time. None of them – neither the Russian Empire, nor England, nor France – wanted a united Balkan region based on the cooperation of peoples, as this would not serve their geopolitical and economic interests. On the contrary, they did everything they could to prevent such a prospect.

At the same time, the ideas of nationalism had begun to permeate the bourgeois classes in every Balkan country. This acted as an obstacle to cooperation between the liberation movements of different peoples, as each national movement sought domination or exclusivity rather than cooperation. The result was often conflict: one country standing in the way of the other, even engaging in warfare.

This climate of aggravation and division made it extremely difficult to implement the alternative project based on democratic coexistence and equal cooperation. Efforts at communes and federal models of self-management were attacked on many levels – ideologically, politically and militarily. Thus, the nationalist model eventually managed to prevail, not necessarily because it was the most ideologically powerful, but because it was actively supported by state and suprastate interests.

PM: You talk about "United Balkans". However, for many years now we have been driven in the direction of nationalism in the Balkans. How do you comment on this development?

But this does not happen by itself, nor from above. It is a long-term process that must be undertaken by social movements, collectives and communities. To create living public spaces – physical and conceptual – where this education and consciousness of the collective and the public can be cultivated. I don't think there is any other way. If we want autonomy, we have to actively build it.

PM: What do you consider to be the biggest challenge in the effort to redefine the role of the citizen in our time?

YT: The biggest challenge is to overcome the current, distorted version of the citizen – what, in my opinion, is a "caricature" of the true meaning of the concept. Today, a citizen is simply someone who has the necessary papers to reside legally in a place or who is called upon to participate in political life once every four years through his or her vote. Such a perception is prone to xenophobia and voluntary servitude.

But a real citizen has nothing to do with the dominant perception: instead, true citizenry bases itself on the passionate participation in public affairs, on taking responsibility for one's city, community, and fellow human beings. A genuine citizen is someone who takes responsibility for what happens around him, who does not wait for solutions "from above", but actively co-shapes decisions.

The greatest challenge, therefore, is to restore the concept of the citizen as an active and participatory subject. This requires breaking down the walls that separate everyday life from decision-making spaces. To reconnect politics with everyday life. Politics cannot be something distant, technocratic or elitist – it must become everyone's business again.

YT: Nation-states, by their very nature, impose a homogenizing logic: one nation, one flag, one language, one religion. This logic has brought enormous suffering to the peoples of the region – bloodshed, violent conflicts, ethnic cleansing, oppression. In such a global and historical context, it was perhaps to be expected that there was 'no room' for a different model of governance.

The idea of a Balkan federation, as envisioned by some radical movements, was profoundly revolutionary. It was in direct opposition to the dominant interests and institutions of the time, which brought these efforts into an unequal battle – almost like David versus Goliath.

The people who promoted these ideas often found themselves alone and under attack. And yet, they accomplished important things, which left behind a legacy that I don't see as a defeat. On the contrary, I see it as seeds left in the earth – seeds that can still inspire us today, showing us that it is possible to think and build alternatives.

Unfortunately, even today we suffer from a peculiar provincialism: we constantly look to the great revolutions of the West for inspiration and often forget to look for our own revolutionary moments. Moments that unfolded right next door to us, at a short distance in time from the Western examples, and which have just as much – if not more – to teach us.

PM: What story struck you most during the research?

YT: One of the stories that is interesting is that of Strandzha, which also concerns the wider region of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace.

In 1903 the Ilinden-Preobrazhenie Uprising broke out – an uprising that, while well known throughout the Balkan region, is often presented through a distorted prism. It was not a nationalist or imperialist attempt, but a social and liberation struggle.

It was in the context of this uprising that the wider region of Adrianople rose up. In the Strandzha mountain range, on the

present-day border between Bulgaria and Turkey, a guerrilla group under the anaracho-communist Mikhail Gerdzhikov was active. This group managed to liberate a number of towns and villages from the Ottoman forces and created what has become known in history as the Strandzha Commune.

There they reintroduced forms of communalism, abolished money, set up local institutions of self-government and, most strikingly, the rebels themselves refused to take over the administration. They considered that this responsibility belonged to the local populations, whom they respected completely.

One of the first things they did was to draft a text in Greek, addressed to the Greek-speaking inhabitants. In this text they made it clear that they did not intend to establish a Bulgarian regime, but that they were fighting for human rights, freedom and equality for all peoples. Their struggle was not an ethnic one, but a deeply humanitarian and social one.

Predictably, this radical action was fiercely opposed by the Ottoman Empire. In less than a month, the project was destroyed. However, it went down in history as a genuine grassroots effort – an example of popular self-organization and respect for all local populations, regardless of ethnicity.

PM: The organizational model you propose provides for direct-democratic procedures. How do you see direct democracy today? Can it be implemented or is it just a utopia?

YT: In my books I often provide examples that show how direct democracy is not just a theoretical ideal. There are movements around the world, such as the Zapatistas in Mexico or the Kurds in Rojava, who are trying to implement direct-democratic systems today, under very difficult circumstances.

Personally, I do not consider direct democracy to be utopian. The problem is that we often approach it through the limited framework of the nation-state. And that is precisely where the illusion is created that it is unattainable. But if we manage to

break free from this framework, we can see more clearly the possibilities that exist.

Direct democracy, in my opinion, means breaking down the centralized power centers – such as national parliaments – and bringing decision-making closer to the citizens. Moving the center of gravity of political life from the central state to neighborhoods, communities and municipalities. People should be able to come together in a common place and decide collectively on the issues that concern them – from the bottom up.

We are not talking about a magic model that will be imposed overnight, but a gradual process of empowering local communities and collective forms of organization that will antagonize the dominant hierarchal system. And this process is already underway in several parts of the world.

PM: 'Autonomy', according to Cornelius Castoriadis, was defined as the ability of the social subject to consciously determine itself. How feasible is this self-determination in a society where identities are often imposed without individual choice?

YT: Indeed, this self-determination is very difficult within societies where identities – ethnic, gender, religious – are projected and often imposed without the conscious participation of the people themselves. We live in an environment that reproduces ready-made significations and norms, from very early on, without leaving much room for questioning or challenging them.

Therefore, the stakes of autonomy go through another major issue: education – not in the narrow sense of formal education, but as a comprehensive cultivation of the human capacity to think and act consciously in the public sphere. A pedagogy that fosters collective participation, democratic deliberation and creative imagination. And one such education goes beyond the classroom, being woven instead within the tissue of everyday life.