



# 1821 Greek National Revolution Bicentennial

Rigas Feraios as spiritual leader of the Hellenic Diaspora and a predecessor of traditional Greek-Serbian friendship

DR. ALEKSANDRA M. PECINAR

**T**he 1821 Greek National Revolution highlights a variety of political processes, strategies and military tactics, and economic and cultural aspects. Apart from its international character, this unprecedented event catalyzed bilateral relations between Greece and Serbia, two friendly Orthodox Balkan countries with a long tradition of close friendships. Connected by a long history of joint struggles for freedom, with a common historical background dominated by the intriguing personality of Rigas Feraios, these two nations have often demonstrated their mutual goals and spiritual proximity over the years. The Greek National Revolution Bicentennial commemorations offer an opportunity to not only reflect, but also to draw useful conclusions on national thinking and strategic planning for the future.

## RIGAS FERAIOS “GREEK PATRIOT OF SERBIAN HOMELAND”



The Greek writer, political thinker and revolutionary Rigas Feraios

The famous Greek revolutionary and poet, Rigas Feraios (1757–1798), was born in the village of Velestino, Thessaly, exactly where ancient Pherae used to be. He became famous as Rigas of Velestino and Rigas Feraios. Inspired with the ideas of the French revolution and imbued with a burning desire for freedom, he understood the significance of national liberation. His vision for a joint uprising

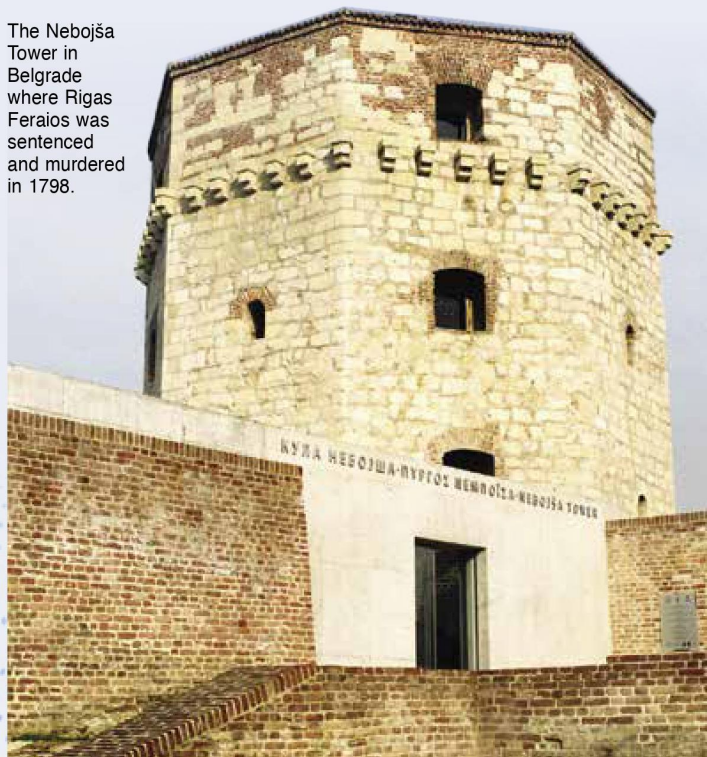
and the liberation of Orthodox nations from the Ottoman Empire emerged from his vision. However, considerable efforts were needed to prepare such a complex armed uprising. He worked tirelessly for that purpose. Rigas’ writings documented his dreams about national enlightenment: *Anthology of Physics* (1790), *Hellenic Republic* (Vienna, 1797), *School for Delicate Lovers* (Vienna, 1790), *New Map of Wallachia*, *General Map of Moldavia* (Vienna, 1797), *Thourios or Patriotic hymn* (poem) (Vienna, 1797), *New Political Constitution of the Inhabitants of Roumeli, Asia Minor, the Islands of the Aegean and*

*the Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia* (Vienna, 1797), and *New Anacharsis* (Vienna, 1797) were written in Demotic Greek.

The Austrian police arrested him and his co-fighters in December 1797 in Trieste as they passed through on their way from Vienna to Venice, where they planned to sail to Greece. Their intention was to organize a liberation uprising against the Turks, first in their homeland and then in all of the Balkans. They were delivered to the Turks in Belgrade and imprisoned in the Nebojša Tower. Rigas Feraios and his seven friends spent 46 days in chains waiting for an uncertain fate. They were supposed to be sent from Belgrade to Constantinople to the Sultan to determine their punishment. But, according to the most probable version and words of a famous Serbian literate, on June 24, 1798, “they were strangled in the dungeons, the Turkish way, with silk cords, at dawn” and their bodies were thrown into the river Danube.

The capital of Serbia, Belgrade, still represents a key reference point of Hellenism. In memory of Rigas Feraios and his martyrdom, a central street in Belgrade now bears his name.

The Nebojša Tower in Belgrade where Rigas Feraios was sentenced and murdered in 1798.





Additionally, the emblematic monument of him dominates the very center of the city where the official representatives of two countries as well as numerous supporters of traditional Greco-Serbian friendship pay tribute to this spiritual leader of the Hellenic Diaspora. And, as a memorial to his last days, there is a memorial plaque on the renovated Nebojša Tower.

It was once said that Rigas Feraios “by his birth and language belonged to the Greeks and by his death to the Serbs; and by his thoughts and work, to all the Balkan peoples.” His tragic end raised him to the level of the first martyr of the liberation struggle of Hellenism. Representing a diachronic symbol of a Greco-Serbian shared vision for freedom, he became the predecessor of Greco-Serbian friendship and cooperation.

## 200 YEARS OF GRECO-SERBIAN SHARED VISION FOR FREEDOM

The trade movements of the peoples of Macedonia, Epirus and Thessaly throughout the 18th century in the northern Balkans are an important aspect of economic development and national formation of Christian populations in the Balkans. This process had caused similar intellectual mobility and the circulation of ideas starting from 1789, creating expectations of freedom among enslaved peoples of the Balkans.

The groundwork for a common action had been prepared by the Greek intellectual Rigas Feraios, who envisioned a revolution of all the Balkan nations based on the idea to unite the Balkans under the auspices of Greek ecumenism. Hence, as early as the beginning of the 19th century, as bearers of the ideas of the Enlightenment and Nationalism, Greeks and Serbs played an important role in the political developments of the Balkans.

The first Serbian uprising and the secret preparations for a Greek revolution coincided. Consequently, the first effective challenge to Ottoman rule began by the Serbs and Greeks almost simultaneously. The news of the Serbian revolt of 1804 was received with great joy by the Greeks, who viewed it as a paradigm for a Greek national revolution.

Several distinguished Serbs had been accepted as members (“brothers”) in the Filiki Eteria, the secret organization that prepared the Greek Revolution made up primarily of Greeks. Symbolic of Greek-Serbian friendship was the blood brotherhood between Greek “armatolos” (Christian Greek irregular soldier) Giorgakis Olympios and Serbian rebel leader Karađorđe. The great resonance of the Serbian uprisings among Greek intellectuals and revolutionaries resulted in their material and moral support. The Serbs made significant contributions to the Greek Revolution. The political and military leader of the revolution, Alexandros Ypsilantis, in addition to Greeks and other ethnicities, had a number of Serb fighters under his command. The Serbian uprisings and the Greek Revolution paved the way for the modern era in



The insignia of the Filiki Eteria (Φιλική Εταιρεία), which was a secret organization that wanted to overthrow Ottoman rule in Greece and establish an independent Greek state.

the Balkans, transforming the two peoples, as creators of the first nation-states, into key players in reshaping the political map in Southeastern Europe and the Near East.

Apart from Rigas Feraios, the great visionary who first sowed the seeds of a common Balkan perspective and was the first to show the way to peace and cooperation in the Balkans, we should not forget the close contacts and initiatives that the leaders of the two countries made over the following years. The common interests of Serbia and Greece, forged within the framework of common historical, religious, cultural and social ties two centuries ago, remains the same—to safeguard the stability, security and prosperity of Southeast Europe. The timeless legacy of Greek-Serbian cooperation, and especially the feelings of solidarity that were created, bore fruit during the Balkan Wars and World War I with great Greek Statesman Eleftherios Venizelos, who is the founder of mutual sense of brotherhood and solidarity which persists to this day.

## 2021: A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

As Greece works toward becoming a pillar of stability in the Balkans and especially in the Eastern Mediterranean region, the country's public diplomacy efforts are increasingly relevant. By embracing all the cultures in these aforementioned areas, along with its connection to North Africa and the Middle East, Greek institutions and strategies could enable the country to become the voice of a vast region.

The celebration of the 200 years since the outbreak of the Greek Revolution of 1821 is an occasion to recognize the struggles and sacrifices of two peoples, which also requires us to think on the present-day position of Serbia and Greece and their future. Representing a pivotal chapter in Greek history and a piece in the puzzle of world history the commemoration events could potentially emphasize the status of Greece and a new public diplomacy paradigm. ■