

Solving the Name Issue: An Act of Political Bravery with a High Political Price

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The conflict between the now renamed Republic of North Macedonia and Greece over the use of the term “Macedonia” started at the beginning of the 1990s and escalated after the Greek veto on the country’s NATO accession in 2008. What followed was a decade of nationalist escalation, until the political constellation was right for a change. In late 2017, a process was set in motion that would lead to the signing of the Prespa agreement on 12 June 2018. The two main actors, Prime Ministers Zoran Zaev and Alexis Tsipras concluded the agreement, despite fierce criticism in their respective countries, and had to pay a high political price. As a result, North Macedonia’s international political blockade has come to an end: the process of acquiring NATO membership has been set in motion and the EU Council is expected to approve the start of accession negotiations with North Macedonia in June 2019.

Macedonia’s Slippery Start

The new country’s slipping into independence as a result of Yugoslavia’s disintegration was bumpy from the very beginning. Surrounded by less than friendly states, it was left defenceless and in the hands of mostly inexperienced politicians. A number of uninspired symbolic gestures offered a broad platform for Greek nationalists to contest the name of the State – Republic of Macedonia –, and claim ownership of the name (“Macedonia is Greek”) for the entire region. Nationalist pressure, orchestrated largely

by Foreign Minister and later Prime Minister Antonis Samaras, was able to impose a common Greek line, insisting that no solution to the “name issue” would be agreed to which contained the term “Macedonia.” Furthermore, accession to the UN and recognition by the EC were delayed by Greek pressure.

Under much international pressure, both sides eventually agreed to the country’s UN membership under the provisional reference of “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia,” which was to be used until a solution to the issue was found. Greece also agreed not to block Macedonia’s accession to international bodies under the provisional reference.

Following a worsening political climate in both countries, an 18-month Greek economic embargo, and under intense diplomatic pressure, an interim accord was reached in 1995, leading to changes in Macedonia’s constitution and national symbols, and enabling the country to access international organizations, such as the OSCE, under the provisional reference.

A Possible Mediated Formula

The process of finding a mediated solution to the name issue was taken over by the UN, where it remained until 2018. A variety of proposals were tabled by UN mediator Matthew Nimetz, and it became increasingly clear that a formula that would be acceptable to both sides would include some kind of a geographic qualifier, thus delimiting the Macedonian State from the whole region, and especially the northern Greek region of Macedonia.

The main difference was in the Greek insistence that this composite name would be used “*erga omnes*,” while the Macedonian position varied, but mainly foresaw a double formula, with the composite name to be used internationally, while the constitutional

name “Republic of Macedonia” would continue to be valid internally.

However, the mediation process was permanently undermined by political gestures and pressure in both countries. Besides this, one contentious issue was the depth of the issues to be negotiated. While the UN’s position was that the name of the country was the only issue of the mediation process, both sides expressed fears over issues of identity, including the name of the people and the language.

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In general, the Greek side was in no hurry to resolve the issue, as it evolved into a political career enabler, the most prominent example of this being Antonis Samaras. On the other hand, the Macedonian State became more and more desperate in its attempt to avoid isolation, especially after its official application for EU accession in 2005.

For more than two decades, neither of the two sides found the courage or opportunity to make a decisive step towards a solution. Indeed, positions became increasingly entrenched and during the decade of nationalist rule in Macedonia, policies were directed at actually deepening the rift, making a solution increasingly improbable.

The Bucharest Trauma

The NATO summit in Bucharest in April 2008 saw a last minute change of heart, when a draft resolution including an invitation for Macedonia to join under the provisional reference was altered at the insistence of Greece. This de facto veto was a blow to the face of US diplomacy, which had become more involved and created an atmosphere of optimism regarding NATO accession.

The humiliation suffered by Macedonian Prime Minister Gruevski has been described by many as so traumatic that it determined a change of heart and

brought him onto the path of the so-called “antiquization,” i.e. redefining Macedonian identity as being that of descendants of Alexander the Great.

However, this partial mystification of a political defeat simplifies matters. Among nationalists, the thesis that claimed Macedonians were not only Slavs, but also had more “noble,” ancient roots, was not new. Besides, shortly after coming to power in 2006, Gruevski’s government renamed the Skopje airport “Alexander the Great.” This was a gesture whose aim was mainly internal, to restore national pride, etc. It was also, of course, quite a childish provocation of Greek nationalists, which especially the then Foreign Minister Dora Bakoyannis was glad to use as a pretext to harden the Greek position.

Nationalist Excesses

What followed the NATO debacle was a decade of nationalist excess in Macedonia. Nikola Gruevski’s government put into action a master plan that was based on the idea of redefining national identity. Public places were renamed, the content of school-books was revised accordingly, civic education was scrapped from the education curricula, and a myriad of increasingly aggressive publications flooded the market. Within a decade, the government managed to implement almost total state capture, including control of the media, ensuring that the new ideology would be propagated on all channels.

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The most visible manifestation of what came to be known as “antiquization” was the revamping of the capital Skopje’s central area into an absurd, dystopian agglomeration of random statues and buildings in an imitation of neo-classicism. At the centre of all this was a 20-metre statue of Alexander, named in Gruevski’s typically childish and “witty” manner “War-

rior on Horse.” The official explanation for the statue’s name was that they did not want to offend Greece. Of course, this was a barely disguised frontal blow, meant as revenge.

Needless to say that this was fuel for Greek nationalists. Moderate positions towards the name issue became less and less tenable. The more Greece slipped into its financial and economic crisis, with extremist parties emerging and gaining massive support, especially in the north, the less a solution to the Macedonian name issue seemed probable. Despite a number of solutions being discussed, the mediation process did not enjoy any success.

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The International Court of Justice Ruling

In 2008, following the Greek refusal to allow NATO accession, the Macedonian government filed a complaint with the International Court of Justice (ICJ), accusing Greece of breaching the interim agreement from 1995. The ICJ ruled in favour of Macedonia in late 2011. However, the benefit Macedonia reaped from this move is questionable: on the one hand it worsened relations with Greece, while allowing Prime Minister Gruevski to adopt a “told you so” attitude. It did not, however, strengthen Macedonia’s negotiating position. On the contrary, an increasingly autocratic governing style drove the country step by step into international isolation.

Finding a Solution

A political crisis tied to a series of leaked, secret wiretaps toppled Gruevski’s government. In a bumpy process, the new government, led by the Social Democrat Zoran Zaev took office in June 2017. At the same time, SYRIZA’s Alexis Tsipras brought

about a change of paradigm in Greece, putting an end to the rule of traditional parties. Both politicians have defined themselves as non-nationalist, and both ran on promises to change traditional patterns of policymaking in their respective countries. Zaev first invested time and energy in a bilateral treaty of good neighbourly relations with Bulgaria, and in improving relations with Albania and Kosovo.

Following some informal, preliminary sounding out sessions, the two leaders expressed a will to resolve the issue. The UN mediation process was revived in early 2018 and resulted in some concrete proposals, including the one eventually adopted. In a joint show of good will at the World Economic Forum in Davos, both prime ministers made optimistic declarations. A series of confidence-building measures were agreed upon, such as renaming Skopje’s airport and the main highway through the country, and putting an end to the policy of “antiquization.”

The UN mediation process was put into the hands of foreign ministers Dimitrov and Kotzias, and by June 2018, an agreement was reached. This put an end to the interim accord and relations between the two countries have been gradually normalized. Greece lifted its veto on Macedonia’s NATO membership and EU accession. NATO then extended an invitation to North Macedonia to join the organization. This will happen as soon as all members have ratified the decision. EU accession talks are expected to start in July 2019.

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The Compromises

While taking a bold leap towards a solution, both prime ministers faced fierce opposition at home. Tsipras had to dismiss his Foreign Minister to avoid his coalition collapsing, and is facing parliamentary elections in 2019. The compromise is seen as treason by ultra-nationalist forces and will be a major issue in the election campaign.

Prime Minister Zaev, on the other hand, had to secure a two-thirds majority in Parliament in order to enact constitutional changes to implement the Prespa agreement. In an uninspired move, he promised to back a solution through a referendum. This was held in September 2018 against a boycott campaign run by the opposition. Although the results were overwhelmingly in favour of the Prespa agreement, the referendum did not meet the required 50 per cent quorum, thus weakening Zaev's position. In order to secure the parliamentary majority, he had to agree to a number of very unpopular measures, including amnesty for perpetrators of a violent attack on Parliament in April 2017.

It is likely that these compromises will negatively affect the credibility of Zaev's government. The first blow came in the first round of the presidential elections in April/May 2019, when the government's candidate only very narrowly beat the main opposition one.

It Will Last

Although the name agreement is under heavy attack from the opposition in both countries, there are clear signs that it won't be formally contested. The agreement has already triggered a number of international processes, and it cannot be in the interest of either side for these to come undone. Both countries will

benefit from North Macedonia's EU accession process, which will firstly deepen economic ties, and eventually cultural and societal ones, too.

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This success story would be somewhat unique in the region and would certainly go down in history as a rare victory over ethnic nationalism and exclusivism, in a region where, unfortunately, such approaches are still highly prevalent.

Relevant links

BIRN database documenting cost of Skopje 2014

<http://skopje2014.prizma.birn.eu.com/en>

Balkan Insight: Name Dispute <https://balkaninsight.com/macedonia-name-dispute/>

Final Agreement signed between the two countries

<https://vlada.mk/node/15057?ln=en-gb>

<https://vlada.mk/node/16897?ln=en-gb>