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The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) during its almost 45-year period of existence had enabled the consolidation of an ethnic Macedonian identity with all the necessary attributes (language, official history, etc.). When North Macedonia declared its independence from SFRY in September 1991 (under its then constitutional name “Republic of Macedonia”) its official narrative concerning its identity was openly challenged by Greece and Bulgaria, with the former’s opposition complicating not only North Macedonia’s efforts to gain international recognition but also undermining its Euro-Atlantic ambitions.

The Name Dispute with Greece and Its Resolution: The Prespa Agreement

The signing of the Prespa Agreement in June 2018 by the then Prime Ministers of Greece, Alexis Tsipras, and North Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, had signalled the conclusion of a long diplomatic dispute between the two countries that had lasted almost three decades. It had begun following the declaration of independence by the Republic of Macedonia, in September 1991, when Greece moved diplomatically to block its recognition, arguing that its state ideology, including its name, was irredentist by nature, threatening its territorial integrity and its cultural heritage over Македония (the Greek region of geographic Macedonia). The “name dispute,” as it became widely known, continued for the next 27 years, although bilateral relations between North Macedonia and Greece went through various phases: a severe embargo imposed by Athens on North Macedonia between February 1994 and September 1995; a normalization of relations, following the signing of the so-called Interim Agreement of New York in September 1995, which, however, kept the “name dispute” alive; a remarkable development of bilateral economic relations during the second half of the '90s that lasted until 2008, which saw Greece becoming one of the top trade and investment partners of North Macedonia; a deterioration of political relations from April 2008 – and NATO’s Summit in Bucharest, when North Macedonia failed to secure an invitation to join the Alliance due to Greece’s objections – until the middle of 2015, as the government of Nikola Gruevski implemented the “politics of antiquization” of the Macedonian identity, antagonizing Athens and Sofia; and even a series of Confidence Building Measures signed between the two countries, in the summer of 2015, that restored a measure of cooperation between them at the height of a major refugee crisis affecting the region and the EU.

For North Macedonia, the Prespa Agreement was a painful compromise. The government of Zoran Zaev abandoned Skopje’s established policy on the “name dispute,” according to which the Republic of Macedonia was ready to compromise on its name only for its bilateral relations with Greece. Instead it accepted Athens position (as had been officially formed by the Greek government in 2007), i.e., that any agreement should include a composite name, that would include the term “Macedonia,” but should also be of an *erga omnes nature*, i.e. having universal application, for both internal and external use. In exchange, the agreement secured Greece’s recognition of the Macedonian language – with the stipulation that it be a language that belongs to the “group of South
Slavic languages” – and the written understanding that the terms “Macedonia and Macedonian refer to a different historical context and cultural legacy” to the two parties to the agreement – with the clarification that Ancient Macedonia is part “of the Hellenic civilization, history, culture and heritage… from antiquity to present day” (Art 7 of the Treaty).

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Furthermore, Athens committed to supporting the Euro-Atlantic integration of North Macedonia, something that was of cardinal importance for Zoran Zaev’s government. The “removal of the Greek veto” rallied behind the agreement of the ethnic Albanian community, securing its ratification in parliament on 5 July 2018. Following the ratification of the Prespa Agreement, also by the Greek Parliament, an accession protocol between North Macedonia and NATO was quickly signed, opening the way for the former to join the Alliance: on 27 March 2020 North Macedonia became the newest member of NATO. North Macedonia’s EU accession process however remained stalled.

Bulgaria Blocks North Macedonia’s EU Accession Process

North Macedonia’s hopes for setting off on its long-awaited EU accession process (the country had applied to join the EU back in March 2004), following the ratification of the Prespa Agreement, were quickly dashed. In October 2019, France and the Netherlands blocked the opening of negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania, despite the positive recommendations of the European Commission and a similar resolution by the European Parliament. And, soon after, to the surprise of many unfamiliar with the history of Bulgaria-North Macedonia relations, Sofia adopted a hard position on the issue, twice blocking the beginning of North Macedonia’s EU accession process. How had it come to this?

Since the declaration of independence of the Republic of Macedonia in September 1991, political elites in Sofia have been struggling to formulate a coherent policy vis-à-vis Skopje. Bulgaria became the first country to recognize the Republic of Macedonia in January 1992; a decision that was, however, accompanied by the “clarification” that Bulgaria “does not recognize the Macedonian nation and language.” Post-1992 relations between Sofia and Skopje continued to be far from problem free, with the so-called “language dispute” not technically addressed until 1999. Even worse from Bulgaria’s point of view, the mediocre progress in bilateral relations since early 1992 was the fault of the “ungrateful Macedonians who were continuing with their anti-Bulgarian policies, in issues such as official historiography or the treatment of those declaring themselves ethnic Bulgarians” (Christidis, 2020).

The signing of the Treaty of Friendship, Good-Neighbourliness and Cooperation between Bulgaria and North Macedonia in August 2017 also failed to meet Bulgarian expectations. There was little progress in boosting bilateral relations (for example in advancing infrastructural connectivity between the two countries), while the work of a commission of (mainly) history experts, which had been established to examine “educational and historical issues,” failed to reach an agreement on the identity of important historical figures (like the revolutionary Gotse Delchev). For Bulgarian parties, and in particular VMRO, which saw itself as the “defender of Bulgaria’s heritage in Macedonia,” the lack of concrete results on the work of the commission of historians was “insulting” and “proof of Skopje’s lack of good faith.” In the process, VMRO not only demanded a toughening of Sofia’s policies vis-à-vis Skopje, but also managed to impose its line on the Bulgarian government (Christidis, 2020).

On 9 October 2019, the Bulgarian government adopted the so-called Framework Position, where it is stated that Sofia “will not allow EU integration to be accompanied by the European legitimation of a state-sponsored, anti-Bulgarian ideology” (Christidis, 2019). The adoption of the document, which was also approved by the Bulgarian Parliament, constituted a turning point in Bulgarian policy: Sofia
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“bound itself” into a tough diplomatic position, reminiscent of the Greek policy vis-à-vis North Macedonia, where dominant perceptions of history-identity and a feeling of diplomatic superiority produced a diplomatic position that no government dared to openly challenge, let alone abandon. The new Bulgarian position brought about not only successive “vetoes” by Sofia at the beginning of the EU accession process of North Macedonia (in November 2020 and October 2021), but also unavoidably had a negative effect on bilateral relations: any advocate of closer relations with Bulgaria in North Macedonia was put in an untenable position domestically, as it was hard to justify what in North Macedonia was seen as a full-blown challenge to Macedonian identity and history. Any “feel-good” factor that had remained following the August 2017 agreement quickly disappeared, and bilateral relations backtracked to the pre-August 2017 era.

**Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine and the New Urgency to Start the EU Accession Process**

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, on 24 February 2022, added a new “geopolitical urgency” to the search for an agreement between Sofia and Skopje, which would allow the unblocking of North Macedonia’s EU accession process, together with that of Albania. On 14 March the EU High Commissioner Josep Borrell stated in Skopje that “the EU should launch negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania as soon as possible to strengthen security in the Western Balkans” (Dimitrievska, 2022). A couple of weeks later, on 28 March, the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz expressed his concerns about the “slow pace of Western Balkan countries’ EU accession processes,” adding that Albania and North Macedonia’s accession to the EU needed to start “as soon as possible because any delay will make the Western Balkans vulnerable to outside influence” (Maru-
By the end of March, Petkov had announced that the bilateral history commission was “making progress,” while political dialogue between the two governments was also “going well,” adding that “we still have a few milestones to reach before a breakthrough is possible, including on the Bulgarian demand for greater protection of minority rights of Bulgarians in North Macedonia, as well as on the exact formulation of the EU accession negotiating framework for North Macedonia” (Marusic, 2022). There is clearly a new diplomatic momentum, generating hopes for a formula that would allow North Macedonia’s accession talks to begin by the end of the French Presidency; a development that would not only provide a significant boost to Bulgaria-North Macedonia relations, but would greatly benefit the stability of the Western Balkans.

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Any such formula, however, will need to gain the approval of the four coalition partners in Petkov’s government in order to get through the Bulgarian Parliament. An increasingly challenging prospect for Bulgaria’s dynamic Prime Minister, given the growing strains his coalition government is facing. (Георгиев, 2022).

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