

The Macedonia Name Dispute: A Few Drivers and Spoilers of Success

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ABSTRACT *In June 2018, after 27 years of negotiations, the governments of Macedonia and Greece signed an agreement to resolve the so-called ‘name dispute’ over the use of the term ‘Macedonia.’ The agreement put an end to one of the longest regional disputes and is expected to unblock Macedonia’s integration into NATO and the EU, where Greece had vetoed its membership since 2008. However, the full success of the agreement is still uncertain, with persistent domestic resistance in both countries and a challenging regional and geopolitical context.*

Introduction

When in June 2018, the prime ministers of Macedonia and Greece signed an agreement aimed at resolving the long-standing ‘name dispute’ between the two countries, reactions among the domestic and international public ranged from disbelief to rejection, to congratulations. Putting an end to a bilateral dispute that had dominated Macedonia’s foreign policy since independence –and has come to define its relationship with key international partners such as NATO and the EU– entailed some difficult decisions on behalf of both governments.

The Macedonian government agreed to change the name of the country to ‘North Macedonia’ –a major concession, and for many Macedonians a move indicating that Greece had ‘won’ the dispute. The new name is both for international and domestic uses, including in forums and in bilateral relations with countries that have already recognized Macedonia as the ‘Republic of Macedonia.’ The Greek government committed to revoke its vetoes in NATO and the EU and supporting Macedonia’s membership in these organizations. It also accepted the use of ‘Macedonian’ to designate the nationality and language of Macedonia. In addition, both parties committed to improv-

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ing mutual relations and working together to eradicate irredentist and hate speech aimed at the other.¹

Whether the long-term effects of the agreement will be those that the Macedonian government desired –unblocking the EU and NATO integration– remains to be seen. The country has yet to start EU accession talks because the EU postponed the decision to open negotiations talks to June 2019. Progress with NATO membership was quicker. Once the agreement was ratified by both parliaments in February 2019, the alliance issued an invitation for membership. Nonetheless, opposition to the agreement, now referred to as the Prespa Agreement after the lake on the Macedonian-Greek border where it was signed, is still strong in both countries. The government had proceeded to implement the agreement even after a referendum on it in Macedonia in September 2018 had failed and many public concerns remain.

Moreover, the Prespa Agreement has opened several questions about the domestic political divisions in Mace-

donia, the declining power of the EU in the Western Balkans and its waning appeal to the populations, and the evolving geopolitical environment in the Balkans. The ultimate success of the Prespa Agreement to create a lasting solution to the dispute between the two countries depends on these domestic and external factors, even after both parliaments have ratified the document itself. Therefore in the rest of this paper, I address these issues, looking at the state of Macedonian democracy and its reform processes, the EU's role in encouraging domestic reforms, as well as some of the wider regional and geopolitical implications.

The evidence suggests that although the appeal and influence of the EU have been steadily declining over the past decade, the EU integration remains the only credible alternative to nationalist political ideologies. However, the EU's declining appeal means that domestic political elites are less willing to comply with the EU requirements for reforms, and more inclined to negotiate and bargain for the rewards given by the EU. As a result, political and democratic reforms have not accelerated, including in key areas for the EU accession such as fighting corruption and improving the rule of law.

Regionally, the EU remains the most dominant foreign actor. Despite the increasing influence of other regional actors, such as Russia and China, all states in the Balkans continue to prioritize relations with the EU and the U.S. However, the rising influence of



alternative regional actors has contributed to the growing complexity of foreign policies in these countries, and a more nuanced domestic discussion about the role the country should play in regional and international politics.

Domestic Obstacles to Compromise

Internationally, the signing of the Prespa Agreement was largely seen as a positive development in Balkan politics. Yet the compromise enshrined in it was not widely welcomed among the domestic public in Macedonia. Although most of the population in principle supports integration in NATO and the EU, and many wished to see the dispute with Greece resolved, the change of the

name to 'North Macedonia' was seen as too great a concession to Greece. Especially since the reward was rather small and not immediate: Greece would remove its veto in NATO and the EU, but there was no guarantee for starting the EU accession talks or NATO membership.

Moreover, since 1992, the dispute had evolved beyond the initial Greek objection to the name 'Macedonia.' In both countries, the dispute was linked to deeper social and identity concerns, which have been exacerbated by economic hardship over the past decade.² Therefore, while the Prespa Agreement provides a solution to the formal dispute over the name, the deeper identity and social concerns have not been fully addressed. They continue to drive resistance in both countries.

Workers cover the name *Republic of Macedonia* with a sign reading *Republic of North Macedonia* on a road sign at the Greece-Macedonia Bogorodica border crossing on February 13, 2019.

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As a result, the public is deeply divided over the Prespa Agreement.³ How the government deals with these divisions can potentially determine the success of the agreement. Nonetheless, so far the government has done little to address domestic resistance. Perhaps because it was in a rush to fulfill its obligations under the agreement, it proceeded with a referendum on it, despite the obvious lack of public consensus. In the run-up to the September poll, as it became clearer that there was no overwhelming majority in favor of the agreement, the government declared the referendum to be of 'consultative' rather than 'binding' nature. This technically relieved the government from the legal obligation to comply with the referendum outcome, especially given the 50 percent turnout requirement for a referendum to be considered successful. However, once the referendum failed, it became clear that there is a pressing

need for a proper public discussion on the agreement with Greece, which so far has been lacking.

The public discussion would be politically prudent too, since the main opposition party, VMRO-DPMNE, was not the main driver for boycotting the referendum. DPMNE was not united in opposing the deal with Greece, even though many of its key members were public about their rejection of the agreement. However, the new party leader, Hristijan Mickoski, never openly called on members and party supporters to boycott or to vote against in the referendum. Those who stayed at home on the day of the referendum thus did not necessarily follow the opposition's line. Rather, it seems there was a genuine grassroots resistance to the deal with Greece, based on the perception of an unjust compromise. Engaging with the public's arguments and concerns would give the government a lead rather than a reactive role regarding the issue, setting the parameters of domestic political debate on the topic. Without such engagement, the 'name issue' is unlikely to disappear from Macedonian domestic politics.

Whether a reformed VMRO-DPMNE under new leadership will return to its nationalist ideology and seek to capitalize on public discontent with the government's compromise with Greece remains to be seen. However, for the solution to be sustainable and lasting, the government needs to address the public's qualms and concerns about it. It will probably not be enough to just wait for the benefits

of the EU and NATO integration to convince Macedonians that the compromise was worthwhile. Not only because these benefits may be slow to come and will only arrive gradually, but because such an important issue –an issue that has virtually defined Macedonia’s position in the international arena since independence– needs to be openly discussed, both at a political and popular level. The government needs to make a convincing case that the compromises in the Prespa Agreement were justified, even if the agreement is far from what Macedonians would have wanted in a best-case scenario.

Otherwise, there is a serious risk that the agreement will be undermined and that it will lead to further polarization in Macedonian politics. In Macedonian society, which is already divided along ethnic, party political, and socio-economic lines, further polarization can only lead to more antagonistic politics and stalled reforms, ultimately preventing the country from overcoming the obstacles that have kept it relatively poor and isolated over the past almost three decades.

Failing to reach a domestic consensus over the Prespa Agreement is not the only issue that could derail the agreement and Macedonia’s bid for the EU and NATO membership. The quality and pace of domestic reform are equally important, especially tackling corruption and weak rule of law. Without serious progress in these areas, the goodwill from having solved the name dispute with Greece will

quickly dissipate and will not result in the desired outcomes –quick progress with EU accession.⁴ The needed reforms are a major task, given the long legacies of corruption and politicization of the state administration and the judiciary. This problem is not unique to Macedonia; all the countries in the region are facing similar challenges. However, given the additional costs of implementing an unpopular compromise with Greece, the government needs to take swift action. Seeking to avoid the costs of painful domestic reforms will only render the compromise with Greece less worthwhile.

However, despite promises to prioritize corruption investigations and other criminal allegations against former government and political figures, as revealed in the leaked wiretaps from 2015, the government since 2016 has been slow to tackle corruption. Although the Special Prosecution, which was established to investigate the allegations from the wiretapping scandal, has completed several investigations against high-ranking politicians, the courts have been slow to rule and then enforce the relatively lenient verdicts. Most notably, the former prime minister and party leader of VMRO-DPMNE, Nikola Gruevski, who led the government between 2006 and 2016, escaped in November 2018 to claim political asylum in Hungary, after being sentenced to two years in prison in a corruption trial. Many saw Gruevski’s escape as part of a prior agreement with the SDSM-led government. Although there is no publicly available evidence



The Prespa Agreement is expected to pave the way to the integration of North Macedonia into the European Union.

KONSTANTINOS
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to suggest that this was the case, the incident further undermines public trust in the judiciary and the rule of law, which seems not to apply to influential politicians.

In addition, the two issues –tackling corruption and resolving the name dispute with Greece– have not remained separate. Recent events in the Macedonian parliament have pointed to potential links between them. Specifically, the preparedness of several opposition deputies to vote in favor of the proposed constitutional amendments to change the country's name was seen as part of another deal between the two parties to reduce or drop charges against those opposition deputies who supported the Prespa Agreement in parliament. Among the eight opposition deputies who supported the vote in parliament, several were under investiga-

tion either for corruption or for the violence in parliament in April 2016. Again, these are merely perceptions among the wider public, which has been accustomed to being governed by politicians with limited respect for the rule of law and anti-corruption norms. But these perceptions have the potential to determine the outcome not only of the next elections but of longer-term policymaking too, including potentially undermining Macedonia's integration into NATO and the EU. A population that feels its concerns are being ignored by the government is unlikely to vote to support its survival and its policies.

The EU's Declining Appeal

It is tempting to see the resolution of the name dispute between Macedonia and Greece in terms of the transfor-

mative power of the EU, i.e. interpreting the decision as a bilateral dispute that was resolved because the prospect of the EU membership made domestic elites willing to compromise and abandon nationalist positions for the benefit of joining the bloc. However, although that was the narrative that many international media and commentators used to describe the events, that would be a simplistic and an incomplete account.⁵

Indeed, Macedonia's progress with EU accession has been blocked since 2009 (and NATO membership since 2008) because of Greek vetoes in both organizations. Once Greece used a veto, no subsequent government, regardless of political orientation, revoked it until a breakthrough in the negotiations with Macedonia could be achieved. However, for almost a decade, the repeated Greek vetoes in the EU and NATO did not make the government in Macedonia more inclined to make concessions. Instead, it took Greece to the International Court of Justice for breaking the Interim Accords from 1995 in vetoing Macedonia's membership in international organizations. Although Macedonia won that case in 2010, the verdict was not enforceable, so the status quo remained and Greece continued to veto the start of membership talks with the EU.

In the decade since the first Greek veto in NATO in 2008, Macedonia made no progress with the EU and NATO integration. However, both NATO and especially the EU went through substantial changes during

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this period. As a result of the global financial crisis and the prolonged European economic downturn, the EU struggled with internal problems and divisions, which did not go unnoticed among the candidate countries in the Balkans. The Greek, Spanish, and Portuguese debt crises, along with similar problems in Italy and Slovenia, revealed that the EU was economically weaker and more vulnerable than many among the candidate countries expected. The related disagreements and divisions between member states over the right monetary policy course in the Eurozone further demonstrated that the EU members, much like candidate states, did not always agree with EU requests and some did not fully comply with EU rules.

As a result of these developments, the EU's credibility in the region declined and the attitude toward the EU among the political elites of Western Balkans states gradually evolved to become more critical and ambivalent. When the EU demanded painful reforms in candidate states, these requests were contrasted to the lack of

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agreement among EU member states about the key EU reforms. Therefore, Western Balkans elites became less likely to prioritize and comply with EU requirements. In the Macedonian case, this was amplified by the knowledge that a Greek veto in the EU would mean no rewards, even if the government proceeded with EU-mandated reforms.

Consequently, the likelihood that the Macedonian and Greek governments would solve the name dispute because of the appeal of EU membership to Macedonian elites had been declining since 2008. The perceived value of the reward –accession talks– has been steadily decreasing, making any concessions by the Macedonian side seem increasingly costly. This view was compounded by fears about the future of the EU enlargements, as growing reluctance to further expand the bloc has been taking root among existing member states.

The change in stance toward the EU has been visible in the rhetoric and policies of the conservative VMRO-

DPMNE-led governments in Macedonia since 2006. Although each government nominally remained committed to the EU integration, there was an obvious lack of effort to find a solution to the name dispute with Greece to remove the main obstacle to the EU membership. In addition, relations with other neighbors, such as Bulgaria, also deteriorated because of various nationalist remarks and gestures in mutual relations, leading to Bulgaria also vetoing Macedonia's accession talks in 2012. The government faced very limited repercussions for such policies –it kept being re-elected until 2016, despite its obvious failures on foreign policy and EU integration issues. This suggests that for the public too, the appeal of EU membership had faded since the peak of pro-EU attitudes in the mid-2000s.⁶

Therefore, to credit the EU with the resolution of the name dispute with Greece would not fully capture the effect of regional and domestic developments over the past decade. Rather, it would be more appropriate to argue that Macedonia and Greece solved the bilateral dispute not because, but despite of the EU. Despite the EU's growing reluctance to further enlarge, and despite its growing internal problems and divisions, despite growing doubts about its power to ensure lasting democratic reforms in new members, it has remained the only credible alternative to the nationalist and socially conservative ideology of the VMRO-DPMNE governments since 2006. So, when the center-left Social Democratic Union (SDSM) sought to challenge

its dominance in 2015-2016, the EU and NATO membership were still the only credible alternatives to the regional isolation that resulted from the VMRO-DPMNE's policies.

Thus, although the EU cannot be fully credited with resolving the name issue, due to its own internal challenges, it still played a role. Moreover, the EU actively supported Greece and Macedonia to solve the name dispute. EU officials were keen to put an end to a dispute that had led a member state to repeatedly veto the accession of a candidate. Its solution is good news for the EU –it signals that it still wields substantial influence in the region. However, if the EU fails to deliver on its promise for membership, it will not be only its credibility that will suffer –the Prespa Agreement, and other regional disputes closed as a result of EU mediation, may re-open again.

Regional Trends

Although around a decade ago the Western Balkans region was seen as firmly anchored in the EU and NATO regional structures, certainty over its integration within Euro-Atlantic structures has gradually declined. This is largely a result of the weakening appeal and declining credibility of the EU and NATO, as discussed above, but partly also a consequence of the changing geopolitical environment in the broader region. With the EU's turn toward internal problems and challenges, other regional and global actors have become more active in the

Western Balkans, filling in the void left by the increasingly reluctant EU.

In particular, Russia and China are seen as the two key challengers to the EU's dominance in the region. Both countries have become diplomatically and commercially more active in the region, including Macedonia, over the past decade. Although the majority of foreign investments still tend to come from West European countries, local politicians and populations are open to more Chinese investments, especially for large infrastructure projects such as motorways or energy production, for which governments in the region have been struggling to raise sufficient funds for decades.⁷ Russian investment in Macedonia is significantly lower than that of West European states, but that is no obstacle to its growing influence. Russia's influence in the region does not stem from its investments but is rather from its status as a symbolic alternative to the dominant and liberal West, and its appeal to pan-Slavic and pan-Orthodox solidarity.

Given the growing complexity in relations between the EU and Russia and China at the global level, their rivalry in the Western Balkans is unlikely to subside soon. Rather, they will continue to be present and seek to increase their influence in this region, which will inevitably affect the foreign policies of Western Balkans countries, including Macedonia. Russia was not in favor of the resolution of the name dispute between Macedonia and Greece made the negotiation process more difficult and empowered spoil-

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ers in both countries. Whether Russian opposition to the deal could derail its implementation is still unclear, but it is certainly something that the governments in both countries need to seriously consider.

Solving bilateral disputes has rarely been a process that only involves the two parties. In the long-standing Macedonia-Greece dispute this was never going to be the case. With early UN involvement, and the inevitable though indirect EU and NATO influence on the actions of both countries, the dispute was hardly bilateral. However, as more global actors acquire an interest in the region, they will seek to gain a stake in these disputes as a means of boosting their influence on governments in the region. Finally solving the name dispute would, therefore, mean one less lever that external actors can pull to affect the decisions and policies of the Macedonian government.

What Comes Next?

Without doubt, the Prespa Agreement from June 2018 was a major

breakthrough in the ‘name dispute’ between Macedonia and Greece. After more than 25 years of negotiations under UN auspices and a persistent deadlock over the past decade, the governments of the two countries reached a compromise on the issue. Resolving the dispute has the potential to transform Macedonia’s foreign policy. It can unblock its accession to the EU and NATO, which have been the country’s top foreign policy priorities since independence. Moreover, relations with neighboring Greece can improve once the ‘name issue’ is not on the agenda, which can lead to greater cooperation and more political and economic ties between the two countries.

However, although primarily a foreign policy issue, the success of the Prespa Agreement is largely dependent on domestic factors in Macedonia. As the above discussion demonstrates, there is still significant opposition to the deal with Greece among the Macedonian public. The failed referendum in September 2018 showed that there are deep divisions inside Macedonian society, which the government needs to address if it wants a sustainable solution to the name dispute. Otherwise, the discontent will continue to grow and can ultimately undermine the agreement and its implementation.

In addition, the implementation of the Prespa Agreement will not be sufficient to fully unblock Macedonia’s bid to join the EU. Better progress in fighting corruption and strengthening the rule of law will remain key

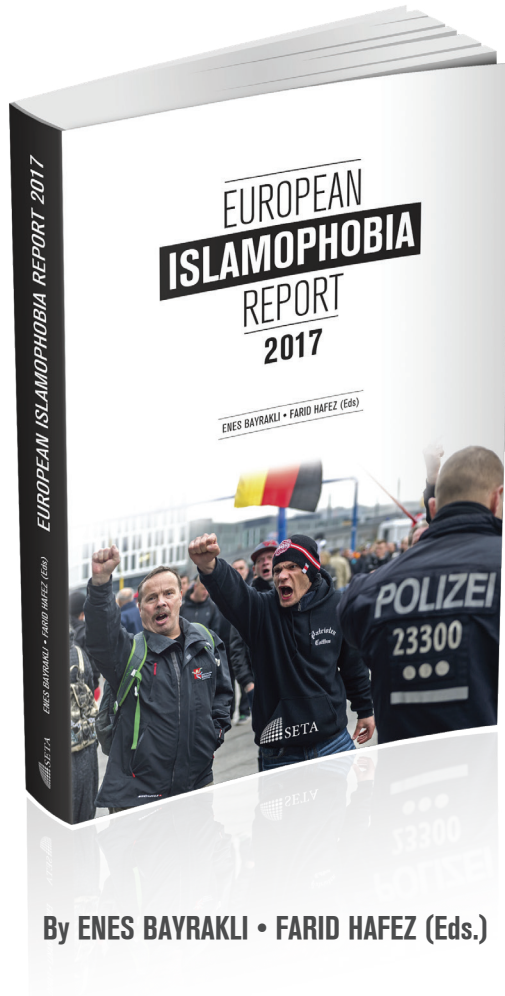
requirements for further progress with the EU accession. This is where the government needs to focus most in coming months, especially given growing public doubts about the government's commitment to investigating high-ranking politicians.

Externally, the environment is not as favorable to EU integration as it was a decade ago. The EU's internal problems, including the impending exit of the UK and the deepening disagreements over migration policy among member states, demonstrate a less appealing and attractive destination for Western Balkans states. The image of the EU as the bastion of liberal democracy and economic prosperity has been tarnished. Moreover, other global powers, such as Russia and China, have become more active in the Western Balkans, challenging the EU's dominance in the region. As a result of all these factors, domestic politicians will have a harder task when convincing the population that the EU and NATO memberships are still in the best interest of the country and are worthwhile despite the compromises and painful reforms that precede them. The alternative –nationalism and isolation– appears to be even less appealing, but the Macedonian elites and population will be the ultimate decision makers on this. ■

Endnotes

1. "Final Agreement for the Settlement of the Differences as Described in the United Nations Security Council Resolutions 817 (1993) and 845 (1993), The Termination of the Interim Accord of 1995, and the Establishment of a Strategic Partnership between the Parties," (June 13, 2018), retrieved from <https://vmacedonia.com/politics/macedonia-greece-agreement.html>.
2. See for example, Persefoni Zeri, Charalambos Tsekeris, and Theodore Tsekeris, "Investigating the Macedonia Naming Dispute in the Twitter Era: Implications for the Greek Identity Crisis," *Hellenic Observatory Papers on Greece and Southeast Europe*, No. 127, (London: European Institute, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2018); Zhidas Daskalovski, "Clashing Historical Narratives and the Macedonian Name Dispute: Solving the Unsolvable," *Trames: A Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (2017), pp. 327-343.
3. Opinion polls from after the signing of the Prespa Agreement and before the referendum showed sharp divisions among the population. See, for example, International Republican Institute's poll from August 29, 2018, retrieved from <https://www.iri.org/resource/macedonia-poll-high-levels-support-eu-nato-ahead-referendum>.
4. See, "Key Findings of the 2018 Report on the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia," *European Commission*, (April 17, 2018), retrieved from http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-18-3405_en.htm.
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6. Polls by the *International Republican Institute* indicate that support for EU membership dropped from around 96 percent in 2008 to around 71 percent in 2017. See, <https://www.mkd.mk/makedonija/politika/anketa-na-iri-pagja-poddrshkata-za-chlenstvo-vo-eu-i-nato> (in Macedonian).
7. The *Financial Times* reported that the five Western Balkans states have received around \$4.9 billion in Chinese investments, which is more than half of the total Chinese investment in Central and Eastern Europe. See, "China's Balkan Investment Pledges Stoke EU Concern," *Financial Times*, (July 1, 2018), retrieved from <https://www.ft.com/content/6c646a3e-7d29-11e8-bc55-50daf11b720d>.

EUROPEAN ISLAMOPHOBIA REPORT 2017



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