

## Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia: The Prespa Agreement. What comes next?

The year 2018 turned out to be decisive for the intractable name dispute between the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and its southern neighbor, Greece. Due to this ongoing dispute - the salience of which is not fully comprehensible for external observers - the relations between the two neighbors have been strained for decades, with Greece constantly blocking Skopje's European integration process and the latter repeatedly provoking Greece, which only added more tension to the situation. However, surprisingly in 2018, the new prime minister of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev announced that his country was finally ready to make amends with Greece and add a geographical qualifier to their name, leading to a remarkable shift in the deadlocked negotiations. On 17 June 2018, the two neighbors turned over a new page in their relationship, which will hopefully put an end to the hostilities of the past: the foreign ministers of both countries signed the *Prespa Agreement*, which would officially rename Greece's neighbor into *Republic of North Macedonia* after being subject to a referendum in Skopje no later than in autumn 2018.

### Historical Review

Back in 1991, following the collapse of Yugoslavia, the Republic of Macedonia – a small, landlocked country in the Balkans with approximately two million inhabitants - declared its independence and joined the United Nations (UN) in 1993 with the provisional name "The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" (also abbreviated as FYROM). Its neighbor Greece strongly objected to the use of the one-word name 'Macedonia', arguing that it implied an ill-disguised territorial aspiration against a northern Greek province of the same name. Skopje countered the claim by arguing that the country has been known as Macedonia for a long time but up until this day, many Greek citizens believe

that their neighbors committed a kind of cultural theft by using symbols the Greeks recognize as their own – the most important one being King Alexander the Great. In 1994, when the confrontational rhetoric reached a critical point, the Greek government (under prime minister Andreas Papandreou) even imposed a trade embargo against FYROM. The state's actions and policies were perceived to be a real threat towards Greece and therefore the center-left government took unilateral measures against its neighbor aimed at preventing the import of products from the Republic of Macedonia.<sup>1</sup> After intense pressure from the European Commission, which even brought the case to the European Court of Justice, and mediation efforts from the United Nations, the 19-month embargo was finally lifted. Especially in Greece's second largest city of Thessaloniki (the capital of the northern region of Greek Macedonia), which in ancient times played an important role in King Alexander the Great's colossal empire and therefore is a source of immense pride for modern-day Greeks, a so-called 'anti-FYROM' sentiment was always clearly visible – a stance that so far has not changed. When Thessaloniki's liberal mayor, Yiannis Boutaris, used the name Macedonia in his visit to Skopje in November last year, he was immediately branded as a traitor on Greek social media and was also discredited for suggesting that Thessaloniki's airport could drop the name Macedonia.<sup>2</sup> All these developments underline the unchanged seriousness of the name dispute.

### Greece

Merely two years ago, Greece was slowly starting to recover from the political upheavals of the recent past where two elections (January and September 2015) and one very controversial referendum (July 2015) took place. Prime minister Alexis Tsipras and his leftwing SYRIZA party had just completed a very turbulent first year

in office and back then, the name dispute with the Republic of Macedonia was not considered a priority of the government, therefore it was not on the daily political agenda. But within a swift period of time, this was about to change. The willingness of SYRIZA to reach a compromise solution on the name dispute with Skopje led to a serious internal disagreement and visible tensions with its coalition partner ANEL (Independent Greeks). The nationalist rightwing party strongly opposes any plans for a compromise on that matter. Particularly, the defense minister Panagiotis Kammenos announced that he will not support any agreement with the neighboring Balkan nation, which will allow it to continue using the name Macedonia, unless it is approved by the Greek people through a referendum or general elections. Usually, the attitude of the public opinion towards the name dispute in Greece appears to be first and foremost highly emotional, but also full of paradoxes. The name issue is considered a matter of greatest national importance that should be resolved as soon as possible because any delay could harm Greek interests by leading to FYROM being internationally recognized as Macedonia. At the same time, there is total unwillingness to reach any kind of compromise since Greece demands the exclusive right to the name Macedonia. This more or less rigid attitude of Greece in the past years as well as the political exploitation of the matter has proven to fuel nationalistic tendencies in the country – a characteristic example being Athens' veto regarding the Republic of Macedonia's accession to NATO in 2008.

### The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

Looking back, the situation in the Republic of Macedonia was different as well. In the decade between 2006 and 2016, the government of prime minister Nikola Gruevski and his *Internal Macedonian*

*Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE)* transformed the country to an authoritarian state and was pursuing a clearly nationalistic agenda, while at the same time having to deal with a variety of political scandals such as corruption, a biased judiciary system and degradation in the freedom of the press. The lack of support from the civil society as well as from the international community was the inevitable result. The government was mostly criticized for its policy of so-called ‘antiquisation’- the attempt to claim ancient historic symbols and figures such as Phillip II and King Alexander the Great as its own, an action that constantly fueled the tensions with its southern neighbor Greece. In April 2017, the country quickly made negative headlines due to an angry mob of VMRO-supporters storming the parliament in Skopje in reaction to the election of Talat Xhaferi (of Albanian descent) as the new speaker, who was supported by the Social Democrats and the parties representing the country’s big ethnic Albanian minority, comprising about one-quarter of the population.<sup>3</sup> A fight broke out, leaving many MPs, journalists and police officers injured. Fortunately, just one month later under the new prime minister, Zoran Zaev, and his *Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM)*, the situation changed for the better. Initially, President Gjorge Ivanov refused for weeks to give Zaev the mandate to form a government, although he had a majority in parliament, but after much international pressure the new government finally took up its work. Having the support of a respectable amount of people in his country, prime minister Zaev and his reform-oriented coalition government (including the *Albanian party for Democratic Union for Integration, DUI*) followed a strong pro-western strategy aimed at strengthening democracy and the rule of law and declared that EU and NATO accession would be the government’s top foreign policy priority for the coming years.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the country clearly committed itself to a European path, first and foremost by signing a bilateral ‘Treaty on Friendship, Good Neighborliness and Cooperation’ with its neighbor Bulgaria in August 2017<sup>5</sup>, as well

as by trying to improve the tense relations with its other neighbor, Greece in the spirit of a constructive dialogue.

### The EU’s Western Balkan Strategy

The six partner countries of the Western Balkans include Albania, Bosnia Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, Serbia and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, which holds the status of an EU candidate country since December 2005. The European Union is the most important donor and investor in the region as well as the primary political partner of the Western Balkans, and thus remains firmly committed to welcome all six of them in ‘the club’, once the necessary reforms are satisfyingly met. Already back in June 2003, at the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Thessaloniki, the EU pledged that all Western Balkan countries could one day become member states. In the meantime, for Serbia and Montenegro (which joined NATO as its 29th member in June 2017) accession talks with Brussels have already been launched in 2014 and 2012 respectively – with the prospect of joining the EU as early as 2025. Despite the initial resistance of France and the Netherlands, who strongly pledged for further consolidation of the crisis-shaken EU before new members are welcomed, the official start of concrete membership talks with the Republic of Macedonia and its western neighbor Albania has been scheduled for June 2019. Until then, Skopje has committed itself to continue working on the implementation of the Prespa Agreement with Greece and finalizing reforms - with a special focus on tackling corruption, strengthening minority rights, security services, intelligence and public administration.<sup>6</sup> For Brussels, an increased cooperation between Greece and its Balkan neighbors in general, is believed to reinforce Western liberal politics in the Balkans and thwart aspirations by countries like Russia or Turkey for a possible dominance in the region.

After the various turbulences of the past years, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia now serves as a positive example for the entire region of the Western Balkans. At the end of 2017, the European

Commission adopted the annual Action Program for the country, which would release €72.3 million for democracy and government initiatives.<sup>7</sup> The EU has also identified the key priorities in the country being among others the prevention of extremism and radicalization, better border management, the fight against corruption and the development of electronic services for the citizens.

In February 2018, the Commission also adopted a new strategy for ‘a credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans’.<sup>8</sup> Although it was stated that all six countries still need to tackle crucial reforms – some to a bigger extent than others – the strategy confirms that their European future remains unquestioned and continues to be in the interest of both the EU and the Western Balkans. This was reaffirmed once more during the EU-Western Balkans Summit held in Sofia, Bulgaria on 17 May 2018, which resulted in the Sofia Declaration. The EU appeared determined to further strengthen its support to the region’s political, economic, and social transformation. Therefore, by setting the date for the start of membership talks with Albania and the Republic of Macedonia for next year, the remaining 27 EU member states signaled their unbroken willingness to welcome Balkan nations and to politically and economically stabilize the region.

### The Prespa Agreement

The 17th of June 2018 turned out to be a historic day for a region trapped in the politics of animosity for almost thirty years. The prime ministers of Greece and the Republic of Macedonia, Alexis Tsipras and Zoran Zaev as well as the EU’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini and EU Commissioner for neighborhood policy and enlargement negotiations, Johannes Hahn, were present when the two foreign ministers, Nikos Kotzias and Nikola Dimitrov, signed the agreement on the banks of lake Prespa, where the borders between Greece, Albania and the Republic of Macedonia meet. Matthew Nimetz, the UN Special Representative for the naming dispute

between the two countries, also attended the signing ceremony and praised both sides for their vision and political courage<sup>9</sup>, which eventually proved able to produce fruitful results. Once ratified in both countries, this agreement will officially rename Greece's neighbor into *Republic of North Macedonia*. Moreover, both parties have committed themselves to being close partners and allies from now on, which would mean that Greece will put an end to its 'policy of blocking' and no longer veto any application by the Republic of Macedonia in international, multilateral and regional organizations and institutions. Skopje in turn, will have to hold a referendum and make many constitutional amendments before the Greek parliament ratifies the Agreement.<sup>10</sup>

Some gestures of good faith are already visible and are expected to advocate the mutual attempt to change the negative experiences of the past – the most prominent example being the decision of the Republic of Macedonia under the leadership of prime minister Zaev at the beginning of 2018, to launch confidence building measures by declaring its willingness to rename the country's main airport to *Skopje International Airport* and the main highway to *Friendship highway* – leaving out "Alexander the Great" in both names.

All in all, the Prespa Agreement paves the way for the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to begin official EU accession talks and also opened the door for the country to join the Transatlantic Alliance. During the last NATO Summit in Brussels on 11-12 July 2018, the government in Skopje was officially invited to begin accession talks.

### Remaining Challenges

Although the Greek government of prime minister Tsipras survived a no-confidence vote in Parliament on the 16th of June 2018, following the reached agreement with Skopje, it was anything but easy to get to this point. Over the last months, the name issue and all the relevant developments enjoyed wide media coverage on both sides, whilst nationalist hardliners

continued to pose a serious threat to the deal. Polls conducted in Greece showed that a majority of people (68.3%) are strongly against the agreement.<sup>11</sup> This signals that the consequences in the aftermath of the agreement could cost SYRIZA the political support. As a result, the party keeps on losing its popularity and the main opposition party, New Democracy (ND), is celebrating a strong comeback by constantly increasing its lead over SYRIZA. Tens of thousands of people demonstrated in all parts of Greece – with the northern province of Makedonia, where the issue is even more sensitive, supposedly witnessing around 100.000 protesters – against any solution that would include the term Macedonia and the recognition of a 'Macedonian language', calling the Agreement a national betrayal and chanting anti-government slogans. Nevertheless, the question of whether politicians like the Greek defense minister Kammenos would indeed be prepared to risk political turmoil at such a critical moment for Greece, which is set to exit its third international bailout in August 2018, remains to be answered. At the same time, people in Skopje also went on the streets to protest against the deal while high-ranking politicians like President Ivanov also strongly refused to support the Prespa Agreement - a fact which was expected to complicate the situation even more. But despite all the hostile rhetoric and the protests, the agreement successfully overcame a first hurdle by securing the approval of the parliament for a second time after a one-time veto by President Ivanov.

As for the European Union, it undoubtedly needs to be even more present in the area by highlighting its unequivocal interest in the Western Balkans in order to prevent the development of a political vacuum there. The violence in the Parliament of Skopje in late April 2017 was a serious warning about the fragile stability of the country without a strong presence of the EU that should always be keeping a close eye on regional developments. The Republic of Macedonia also enjoys strategic importance because of its location at the center of the so-called Balkan route taken by many migrants fleeing war-torn

countries. Therefore, the situation as a whole can only be improved if there is an undeniable European Union membership perspective. The decision to open the negotiation talks in summer 2019 gives the EU the necessary credibility in the region and serves as a conformation for all Balkan countries that their reform efforts are finally bearing fruit. Additionally, European countries like Austria, which currently holds the EU-Presidency in the second half of 2018, need to use their diplomatic and mediating skills to their fullest extent and concentrate their efforts on breathing life back into the Western Balkan enlargement process. This goes especially for Austria since its foreign policy always showed a special interest in the Balkans due to the tradition of strong cultural, economic and political relations.

### Concluding remarks

The Balkan countries have suffered from nationalist sentiments and political instability for a very long time and therefore it would be advisable for the European Union to time and again clearly signal that its door remains open for new members to join. Brussels needs to continue to actively engage in this region and strongly support the countries in their commitment to good neighborly relations and deepening of regional understanding, through mutual respect and cooperation. A credible enlargement policy is a key component of the EU's Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy but further than that, it is in the interest of the whole of Europe for the Western Balkans to become more democratic, stable and firmly anchored in the rule of law. It is time to finally move away from the past and towards a common European future.

Despite the various differences and challenges, a solution to the name dispute between Greece and its Balkan neighbor may be closer than it has ever been. For the Republic of Macedonia, the fight for an internationally acceptable solution holds the key to a better future. Resolving the name dispute would open the door to greater prosperity and stability for the country through membership in the

European Union as well as the accession to NATO. Regardless of all the hostile rhetoric by some parts of the population in both countries, the significance of the Prespa Agreement and its heavy symbolism is not to be underestimated. It should be interpreted as a rare moment of success for the European Union but also for the Republic of Macedonia, whose people are desperate to see their impoverished country joining the rest of the western world. As for Greece, the government's efforts and determination to reach a compromise with its neighbor after almost 30 years, can only be congratulated and encouraged.

Although the Prespa Agreement is regarded as the key that could open the door to permanent peace and reconciliation in this troubled region, one process deserves special attention: changing the hearts and mindsets of Greek and Macedonian citizens alike will be quite difficult due to linkages to the ethnic and cultural identity but also national pride, and thus will undoubtedly take some time. It is therefore particularly important that the Prespa Agreement survives and is continuously supported by both countries in the future.

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## Notes

1) European Commission: Press Release Database, [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-94-278\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-94-278_en.htm) (accessed 01.08.2018)

2) The official name of the airport being Thessaloniki Airport "Makedonia", see under <http://www.hcaa.gr/en/our-airports/kratikos-aerolimenas-8essalonikhs-makedonia-ka8m>

3) BBC News: 'Macedonian parliament stormed by protesters in Skopje', 27 April 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39738865> (accessed 06.08.2018)

4) European Commission: Fact Sheet 'Key findings of the 2018 Report on the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia', 17 April 2018, [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_MEMO-18-3405\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-18-3405_en.htm) (accessed 23.07.2018)

5) Macedonian Information Agency: 'Macedonia-Bulgaria friendship treaty enters into force', 14 February 2018, <https://www.mia.mk/en/Inside/RenderSingleNews/61/134111268> (accessed 10.08.2018)

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11) ProtoThema: 'New poll: 68.3% say 'NO' to the Tsipras-Zaev agreement', 17 June 2018, <http://en.protothema.gr/new-poll-683-say-no-to-the-tsipras-zaev-agreement/> (accessed 30.07.2018)

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