



Weekly Briefing

**Macedonia External Relations briefing:
The Name Dispute: Historical Considerations and
Their Contemporary Relevance**
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The Name Dispute: Historical Considerations and Their Contemporary Relevance

Context

The infamous Macedonian name dispute is now formally well into its third decade of existence. It is not only a bilateral dispute between Greece and Macedonia, but rather a dispute that can determine the future trajectory of the whole Balkan region, and even of the European Union – as it stands in the way of its next round of enlargement. However, while there is an ever more international attention to the topic of the name dispute, there seems to be little understanding on its origins and trajectory. On the other hand, the domestic debates in Macedonia and Greece are dominated by historical arguments. Therefore, in order to bridge the gap and provide a proper insight into the name dispute, this report on the external relations of Macedonia analyzes the different historical components of the name dispute and their contemporary relevance, trying to present a version that is comprehensible for external observers who do not have knowledge of the region itself. In the subsequent report on external relations, I will discuss the more recent developments and the prospects for solution.

The Region of Macedonia

One of the underlying reasons for the existence of the name dispute can be traced to the different conceptions over the historic legacy and the territory of Macedonia. As a geographical region, Macedonia encompasses a significant part of the Balkan Peninsula; however, as such, the region of Macedonia does not represent a unified political or cultural concept, but rather a fragmented one. Any attempt to frame the geographical region of Macedonia in cultural or political terms by any party would be considered irredentism and expansionist claim. Even maps of the region of Macedonia are considered politically controversial (one of them to be found below for illustration).



Source: Wikimedia

The geographical region of Macedonia had for centuries belonged to the big empires – the Roman, the Byzantine, and the Ottoman Empire. In the 18th and 19th century, however, it became an arena of various anti-Ottoman struggles (both grassroots and externally-drive) carried by different actors, with various agendas. This region was the central site of the Balkan Wars (1912-1913); with the Peace Treaty of Bucharest 1913, the region was taken from the Ottoman Empire and split between the historical claimants – Serbia, Greece and Bulgaria (and a tiny part went to Albania). In the narratives of the respective countries, however, this was considered as “liberation” of Macedonia and fixing a great historical injustice.

Greece received the largest portion of the region (around the shore of the Aegean Sea, or the “Aegean” part) including the city of Thessaloniki. While formerly this was a rather multicultural region, with significant Muslim and Jewish population, and with both Greek and Slavic speakers, in the subsequent period, through policies of nation-building and population exchanges, the region was rapidly Hellenized. Serbia received the second largest part of Macedonia (around the basin of the river Vardar, or the “Vardar” part). This territory was then incorporated as a province in the new-found kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes that was later on reconceptualized as the Kingdom Yugoslavia. After the Second World War, this Yugoslav province (*banovina*) became a republic within the new socialist federation, called Macedonia. After the

dissolution of Yugoslavia, the federal republic became an independent country that (still) carries the name Macedonia. The third part of the region of Macedonia, in the Pirin Mountains (or the “Pirin” part) was taken by Bulgaria. Today it remains part of Bulgaria. A small part of the region was given to Albania as well.

The complex history of the region of Macedonia has therefore led to various historical claims by various actors at the level of ethnic groups and states, leading to a regional contentious politics. It and also put the country Macedonia in a particularly difficult position to navigate and amortize all these different challenges – while at the same time, creating the temptation for the birth of a new Macedonian nationalism. However, it is important to note that the dispute with Greece really stands out compared to other unsettled issues. The Republic of Macedonia was recognized by all other former Yugoslav republics including Serbia, and it has no statehood issues with them (the only identitarian problem is the question of the autocephaly of the Macedonian Orthodox Church – in orthodox countries, the question of national churches is not a civil society issue, but rather a political issue). Bulgaria considers much of the Macedonian history related to the Middle Ages and the Ottoman Period to be part of the Bulgarian heritage. However, it does recognize the existence of the independent Republic of Macedonia, and as of 2017, with the Treaty on Good Neighborly Relations, it does also recognize its language and national identity as separate one. And aside from the perennial question of inter-ethnic relations, the state-level relations with Albania are not marked with significant disputes.

Greek Civil War and its legacy

A particularly important event in the 20th century that shaped the dynamics of the Balkans and has had direct consequence on the name dispute, was the Greek Civil War of the 1940s (1946-1949), following the end of World War 2, and being one of the few proxy wars between the Eastern and the Western Blocs in the Cold War Era. There were two sides in the Greek Civil War: on one side, the royalists/nationalists backed by the UK and the US, and on the other hand

the communist partisans, backed by Yugoslavia, the USSR, Bulgaria and Albania.

Slavic speakers and ethnic Macedonians of Northern Greece (the Greek region of Macedonia) backed the communist side. Among them, and among the Yugoslav side, there was the idea of creating a greater Balkan socialist federation that would involve the whole of the region of Macedonia (including the Greek and the Bulgarian parts), and potentially the rest of the Balkans as well. In fact, the solidarity with “Macedonians across the borders” was one of the pillars of the antifascist struggle in Yugoslav Macedonia, and one of the pillars of the foundation of socialist Macedonia. The idea of unifying the three parts of Macedonia has later on also found different iterations outside the narrative of a Balkan socialist federation (i.e. ethnic Macedonian nationalists have believed in the historical mission of unifying the three parts of Macedonia into a Greater Macedonian nation-state).

While the early stages of the Greek Civil War were perhaps the only period in time when certain steps towards changing the borders within the region of Macedonia were taking place, very soon events took a different turn. After the Tito-Stalin split, Greek communists had to pick a side – eventually they chose the side of Stalin, who was less in favor of continuation of the War. As a result, Yugoslavia withdrew from the war, all of which led to a triumph of the royalists and expulsion of a great number of communists and especially ethnic Macedonians from Greece. Ever since, there has been no war and no attempt to change the regional borders of Macedonia.

However, fears of repeating the history loom large, in particular in Greece. One of the main arguments of Greece against the Republic of Macedonia today is the persisting irredentism in the culture, education and sometimes even in politics. Therefore, Greece sees usage of the name “Macedonia” by the Republic of Macedonia as related to such irredentism related to the painful historic episode of the Greek Civil War. At the same time, Greece does not recognize the existence of an ethnic Macedonian minority in Greece, while the ethnic

Macedonian refugees of the Greek Civil War have become some of the pivotal actors in the shaping of the relations and the disputes between the both sides.

Role of the ancient past

Another particular development surrounding the name dispute has been the addition of the ancient historical flavor to the matter. The region of Macedonia has been often conflated with the concept of Ancient Macedonia. The narratives of historic continuity of the days of Alexander the Great have served to mobilize people and forge a sense of belonging. However, the big historical question has been whether Ancient Macedonia was part of the Hellenic realm, or not?

The Greek state, in recent decades, has portrayed Ancient Macedonia (and therefore contemporary Macedonia) as inseparable from Ancient Greece (and the Modern Greek state is founded on the idea of continuity with the antiquity). However, this interpretation gained a particular impetus after the archaeological excavations in Vergina in the Greek province of Macedonia in the 1970s and 1980s, and the discovery of the tomb of Phillip II of Macedon, the ancient Macedonian king and father of Alexander the Great. As a result of the so called “Vergina Syndrom,” the Greek Macedonian identity became increasingly framed as having a historical continuity since ancient times.

Among some ethnic Macedonians, and in particular for ethnic Macedonian refugees from the Greek region of Macedonia during the Civil War, ancient history has been interpreted in a similar way, with some important differences. Namely, just like Greek Macedonians, ethnic Macedonians have considered themselves to be descendants of Alexander; however, they have considered ancient Macedonia to be distinct from the ancient Hellenic civilization, and for them the continuity is a signifier of their own distinction. While these narratives have in general not been the mainstream in Macedonia, they have been revised under the rule of Nikola Gruevski and VMRO-DPMNE, in particular after 2008. Some of the measures to encourage such narratives included the construction of the project Skopje 2014, in which central place was given to the gigantic monuments of Alexander the Great and Phillip II; however a set of changes in

terms of education, culture and political language have also taken place (all of which was called a process of “antiquization” of Macedonia).

The ancient Macedonian history and symbols have thus been one of the central elements of the dispute. In the 1990s, Greece successfully pressured Macedonia into giving up from its national flag inspired by the Vergina Star (the symbol of the ancient Macedonian kings). Recently, Greece has taken the antiquization as an invitation to escalate the dispute and block Macedonia on the international stage. However, the Zaev government has taken measures in undoing some of the antiquization policies of the Gruevski era, in order to demonstrate constructive political will towards Greece.

[To be continued in a few weeks with second part]