



Weekly Briefing

Macedonia External Relations briefing:

The key factors that have shaped Macedonia's name dispute

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Introduction

The name dispute between Macedonia and Greece, while discursively rooted in the interpretations of the recent and ancient history has practically existed as an international symbolic conflict only in the last three decades. There were no formal objections by Greece towards the name "Macedonia" while Macedonia was part of the Yugoslav kingdom, and later on when it was part of the Yugoslav socialist federation. The birth of the name dispute is inherently related with Macedonia's pursuit of independence, but also the context in which the independence has occurred. This report examines the process and the factors that contributed to the birth and escalation of the name dispute. While they had a particular effect in the historical context in which the name dispute emerged, they are as relevant today, since they remain the main driving forces that shape the dispute dynamics today as well as the the main obstacles to its solution.

Key characteristics of the name dispute

Until the late 1980s, Macedonian secessionism (the idea of Macedonia splitting from the Yugoslav federation) was considered a highly controversial position, and was suppressed by the authorities. Its proponents were considered a threat and were persecuted and exiled. However, with the nationalist turn in Yugoslavia that had started in the 1970s with the demands by Slovenia and Croatia for fiscal autonomy, and the ethnicization of the public debates by the late 1980s, as a spillover effect Macedonian secessionism became not only acceptable, but rather a mainstream position, that had found support among the Macedonian communist party leadership as well. However, the process of boosting Macedonian nationalism was particularly amplified with the abolishing of the one-party system and the introduction of pluralism. With the opening of the political space for new political parties, nationalism became a potent

ideology that could easily earn significant number of votes in elections. The emergence of nationalist parties who offered a populist alternative to the dominant communist ideology has also forced communists to adopt a more nationalist discourse.

National issues, including the name issue, had become the central focus of Macedonia's politics since the independence and up until today. In Macedonia's recent history, despite the fact that winning political parties have run on purely economic platforms (VMRO-DPMNE led by Gruevski in 2006); or anticorruption-cum-economic platform (SDSM led by Zaev in 2016), they have ended up dwelling deep into the name issue, which then became a hallmark of their rule. Gruevski failed to reach an agreement with Greece and subsequently pursued policies of antagonization (by restoring the narratives of ancient Macedonian glory); Zaev has so far invested much of his political capital into finding a solution for the name dispute (without clear outcome in sight) and undoing the work of Gruevski in terms of building ethnic Macedonian nationalist discourse around the narratives of ancient Macedonia.

The content of the ethnic Macedonian nationalism that emerged in the 1980s, was related to the process of ethnicization of politics in Yugoslavia. On the opposite side of the ethnicization of Macedonian politics and external minority protection is the issue of ethnic minority issues inside Macedonia (however, that is beyond the scope of this paper). Importantly, Macedonian leaders became more vocal not only about the establishment of an independent Macedonian state, but also about protecting the ethnic Macedonians in the neighboring countries (Bulgaria, Albania and most notably Greece). The more nationalist manifestations of this idea took a more irredentist form, and translated into territorial claims towards Bulgaria and Greece (importantly, they never became a policy). Nevertheless, due to the sharpening rhetoric by Macedonian leaders, and given the role of the ethnic Macedonians in the Civil War in Greece in the 1940s (when they were on the side of communists, and were driven by the idea of splitting from Greece and incorporating the Greek

region of Macedonia in a greater Yugoslav/Balkan socialist federation), the external minority protection discourse coming from Skopje started being perceived as a security threat in Greece. While in the 1990s Macedonia made constitutional amendments explicitly giving up the idea of external minority protection, this still exists as a political narrative, in particular among ethnic Macedonian diaspora and certain groups in the country, which reinforces Greek fears.

It the 1970s-1980s, and the early 1990s, Greece also underwent a period of a birth of a new national discourse centered on the Greek region of Macedonia, in the aftermath of the excavations in Vergina, and the discovery of the tomb of Phillip II of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great. For the Greek government, the newfound relevance and symbolic capital of Macedonia presented a particular opportunity to further pursue legitimation through recalling narratives of the ancient glorious past, but also to give new meaning to the region of Macedonia and the population living there. Namely, many of the Greek Macedonians originate from the Pontus and cities in today's Turkey. They arrived to the region of Macedonia in the early 20th century as a result of the population exchanges following the wars. Their status of settlers, in combination to the relative underdevelopment had made the region of Macedonia somewhat of a periphery inside Greece. However, once the story of the ancient glory was restored, the region now became the new heart of Greek nation; this raised the stakes for the Greek government to respond to competing claims coming from the north. The romantization of Macedonia also defines the contemporary approach to the question of Greek Macedonia in Greece today. It also reveals why in principle, people in the North of Greece are significantly more sensitive about the name issue compared to people in Athens and the islands.

Diasporic communities played a particular role in catalyzing the tensions between Macedonia and Greece. In the prequel to the name dispute, before Macedonia's proclamation of independence from Yugoslavia, there were no

formal conflicts between the Macedonian socialist leadership and the Greek leadership. There were conflicts on a societal level, and on the level of popular political discourse, but even these were not strong enough to shape the political agenda. Paradoxically, however, the most intense conflicts took place among diasporic communities. The anthropologist Loring Danforth traces the first significant confrontations between Macedonians and Greeks at a football match in Melbourne, Australia, in the 1980s. Fan groups based on ethnic affiliation collided over the use of the name Macedonia and the symbols of ancient Macedonia. Ever since, diasporic communities have continued to collide; even in 2018, there were reports of clashes between organized Greek and Macedonian diasporic groups in Australia.

Ethnic Macedonian diaspora was one of the key drivers of Macedonia's secession and the development of the new Macedonian national discourse in the 1990s, to a great extent based on the narrative of ancient Macedonian continuity. Diasporic communities remain one of the key shapers of the political agenda today, as they have particular leverage due to the high volume of remittances to Macedonia. It is important to mention that, in particular, ethnic Macedonians who escaped Greece in the aftermath of the Civil War and their descendants comprise a significant and influential part of the Macedonian diaspora. As refugees, they still claim the right to return to their properties in Greece; in addition, they also carry a collective trauma of the suffering under the Greek nationalization policies after Greece conquered the southern part of the region of Macedonia in 1912. They consider the participation of ethnic Macedonians in the Greek Civil War as a just struggle for liberation. They also feel contempt towards Yugoslavia for letting them down after the Tito-Stalin split; for them the ancient past is also a vehicle for symbolically overthrowing Macedonia's Yugoslav (South Slavic) identity. Based on a sense of rootedness in the Greek region of Macedonia and their identification as victims of history, the ethnic Macedonian refugees and their descendants, have also over time become the most persistent proponents of the narratives of the Macedonian continuity, and

the ones who have the most confrontational, and sometimes irredentist positions towards Greece. This is used as an argument by Greece to show that there is still a looming danger from ethnic Macedonian nationalism.

Geopolitics played a role in the emergence of the name dispute too. The developments in Macedonia, Greece and in the diaspora, had historically created the preconditions for the name dispute to emerge. However, while they were necessary conditions for a conflict to be born, they were as such still insufficient in the period of political stability (before 1991), as they referred mostly to the level of political rhetoric that was not translated on the level of policy. However, once the security situation in the region worsened in the 1990s, the rhetoric became in itself dangerous. The start of the Yugoslav wars showed that there is a thin line between political claims, and military actions. Yet, for Greece, it was not so much the fear of Macedonia itself (since it itself had to first secure peaceful secession from Yugoslavia), but rather the escalation of the Greco-Turkish relations and the stirring of the Cyprus issue. Even though both NATO members, Greece and Turkey were on the verge of a war in the 1990s. As Macedonia announced its independence, Turkey was among the first countries to recognize the new republic under its constitutional name and provide unconditional political support. This has amplified the fears in Greece that while in its own Macedonia is not a significant threat, it may become in a case of a conflict with Turkey. In 2018, as Greco-Turkish tensions are again heating up, Turkey is becoming ever more vocal on the name dispute, in favor of Macedonia, fueling Greek fears.

The agency of Greek leaders has been crucial for translation for the political discourse into policy measures. Historically, while Greek politicians had a reason for concern about Macedonia, the emergence of the name dispute presented an opportunity for developing new nationalist rhetoric that could mobilize significant support and conversely a large number of votes in elections. In that sense, just as in Macedonia the democratization brought the unintended consequences of the emergence of nationalist actors, the multi-party

constellation in Greece also meant that now political parties could compete over setting the tone and creating the most adequate strategy towards the new Macedonian question. Moreover, for the ruling forces, the Macedonian issue presents no significant risks, while providing an opportunity to boost their support, or distract the public from more meaningful issues (in more recent years, the name dispute has been useful for diverting attention from the economic crisis or corruption issues). For the oppositional forces, there is always the opportunity to criticize the government that it is not hard enough on the issue (this is especially the case today with Nea Demokratia, as the government of Syriza is adopting a more constructive approach). In times of despair and international humiliation, for Greek leaders, the name issue is also one area where they can appear to be in control and relevant. This is the case with the latest, ongoing episodes.

Last but not the least, the name dispute has emerged as an asymmetrical conflict whose main feature is the use of leverage by Greece to complicate Macedonia's recognition and integration on the international stage (with sporadic serious material consequences, such as the imposition of economic embargo against Macedonia in the 1990s, later deemed unlawful by the International Court of Justice). But Greece on its own could not use this leverage; it can do so only because it has been met with tacit solidarity and acceptance by the international community. Hence, in the 1990s, due to the Greek objections (and the acceptance of such objections by the international community), the name issue led to a delayed recognition of the independence of Macedonia, and a delayed entrance in the international institutions. Today, despite the decisions of the illegality of some of Greece's actions by international courts (such as the blocking of Macedonia's NATO accession), and despite the existence of the Interim Agreement of 1995 which is in some way a solution for many of the legal obstacles, there is a wide consensus among relevant international actors that the name dispute still needs to be solved, thereby legitimating the Greek position (moreover, they ignore the fact that according to the International Court

of Justice, the Greece has violated this agreement). The EU itself has embraced the notion that the name issue is a political obstacle for Macedonia joining the Union, and as a result, the name issue has become more important than all other criteria for Macedonia's accession bid. In fact, while the majority of the countries in the world recognize Macedonia by its constitutional name (including China, Russia and the United States), European powers - in the first place Germany, France and the United Kingdom – do not recognize it as such and insist on final solution. As a result, even though legally Macedonia can be admitted into international organizations under the provisional reference “The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” (under which it has joined the UN), politically there is no support for such act. This, in turn, has resulted with the name issue not only being a bilateral dispute between Macedonia and Greece, but rather a statehood-related issue for Macedonia.

Conclusion

The name dispute between Macedonia and Greece exists because Macedonia is an independent state, whose existence, or rather the usage of particular symbols (in the first place its name), is treated as a threat by Greece. The dispute has emerged in the late 1980s and gained the form of a symbolic conflict in the 1990s as an outcome of several factors: legacy of border (re)drawing and political dynamics (in particular the nationalization processes and population exchanges) in the aftermath of the conquest of the region of Macedonia after the Balkan Wars; the legacy of the Greek Civil War (in particular the fact that ethnic Macedonians were pro-communist, and pro-secession from Greece); the use of nationalist discourses by political actors in both countries; the role of the diaspora; the impact of Yugoslav wars and the Greco-Turkish tensions; and most importantly, the recognition of the Greek position as legitimate by the international community. These issues continue to shape the dynamics of the dispute today.