



## **Weekly Briefing**

### **Macedonia External Relations briefing:**

# **“Republic of Ilinden Macedonia:” The Short-Lived Proposal for Solving the Name Issue Presented by the Macedonian Prime Minister in May 2018**

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# The Prespa Agreement on Solving the Name Issue

## Introduction

On June 17, 2018, during a landmark meeting which involved crossing the Prespa Lake that lies on the border between the two countries, the governments of Macedonia and Greece made an important breakthrough in finding a solution for the long-standing infamous name dispute. During a ceremony that attracted a worldwide attention their respective Ministers of Foreign Affairs (Nikola Dimitrov of Macedonia and Nikos Kotzias of Greece) signed an agreement by which Macedonia obliges to change the name of the country into “Republic of North Macedonia” for both domestic and international use (so called *erga omnes* principle) via an amendment of its Constitution. In practice, this involves changing all official documents and all personal documents of all citizens as well as all official signage and brand names in order to reflect the new name of the country. With the agreement, Macedonia also obliges to amend history schoolbooks regarding contested episodes from and interpretations of the past, and to undertake a number of other measures aimed at alleviating Greek concerns over irredentism and contesting Hellenic history. All of this is to be done in exchange for Greece unblocking the processes of Macedonia’s accession into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU). The agreement also includes provisions on advancing good neighborly relations and cooperation.

The implementation of the agreement will happen in several phases in the period to follow. As a first step, it was ratified by the Macedonian parliament on June 20, only three days after the signing; the government in Skopje managed to pull this off by fast-tracking the bill. The ratification is yet to be signed by the President of Macedonia, Gjorge Ivanov, who opposes the Prespa Agreement – if Ivanov upholds his veto, the bill will go back to Parliament (after which Ivanov

cannot block it again). Regardless of this process, there will also be a national referendum in Macedonia to be held in September. The last step that Macedonia has committed to undertake is the Constitutional amendment (which require qualified majority in the Parliament, for which a broad consensus is needed). At the end, provided that all of these steps are completed successfully by the Macedonian side, the Greek Parliament will vote on the ratification of the agreement in 2019, which can be passed only with a qualified majority of at least 180 out of 300 votes of the members. In other words, even if Macedonia manages to somehow complete all of its commitments, at the end the fate of the Agreement will be decided by the Greek parliament.

The agreement was presented as a major success by both of the national governments, and solicited unprecedented praise in the Western media and press, with Western governments expressing almost unanimous support for the deal. The success was also acknowledged by the international institutions Macedonia seeks to join (EU and NATO). On the short to medium term, however, the agreement is challenged by the turbulent domestic political dynamics in both Macedonia and Greece, where not only opposition parties - but also parts of the governing structures oppose the deal. Moreover, it is still not completely certain that Macedonia will get what it expects in return for the agreement – that is a breakthrough in its bid for EU membership, and membership in NATO (especially regarding the former, aside from the name issue, Macedonia faces unfavorable political climate in Western Europe, where few governments are not supportive of the process of enlargement). All of these factors contribute to the creation of a rather fuzzy situation that still has no clear outcome. This paper overviews the path to the agreement, as well as the responses by various sides, in order to assess the potential future developments.

## **The Path to the Agreement**

The attempts to solve the Macedonian name dispute<sup>1</sup> have intensified in the last several months. Finding a solution became a priority for the prime ministers of both countries, Zoran Zaev and Alexis Tsipras; the prospective solution became to be perceived as an imminent part of the historical legacy for both of them. Hence, the two Prime Ministers, as well as the two Ministers of Foreign Affairs who serve in their governments, had frequent meetings, and continuous publicity campaign. Yet, tentative solutions (such as the one of Ilinden Macedonia, analyzed in the previous paper) were rejected by a number of actors involved on both sides. For some observers, these developments suggested that the negotiations may follow the same trajectory as past efforts – to enter a new deadlock after the period of increased activity and enthusiasm.

This time, however, Zaev and Tsipras had set a provisional deadline, that is to reach an agreement and have it signed before the meeting of the European Council took place (the meeting was held on June 28), where the national delegations of the EU member states were to deliberate and agree on a vast area of points, including the one on EU enlargement, and in particular the opening of accession negotiations with Macedonia and Albania; and before the NATO Summit that is to take place on July 12 in Brussels, where the Alliance is expected to invite Macedonia to become its 30<sup>th</sup> member. While not part of the EU's or NATO's official regulations, Greece has over time managed to make the solution of the name issue a de facto criteria upon which the future of Macedonia's EU and NATO bids rest. Hence, the solution was framed not only as overcoming the decades-long dispute, but rather as an important step forward in Macedonia's EU and NATO accession processes.

This also meant that the name issue had become not only a bilateral issue, but rather an issue of international significance. Hence, in the weeks leading up to the Zaev-Tsipras meeting in Prespa, a number of European governments, as

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<sup>1</sup> Various aspects of the Macedonian name dispute have been examined in a series of previous papers on Macedonia's external relations.

well as the government of the United States (US) have thrown in their diplomatic weight and pushed for a solution to be reached in time for the international summits. Some of these diplomats attended the Zaev-Tsipras meeting as well, such as the special representative assigned by the United Nations, Matthew Nimetz, the European Commissioner for European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement, Johannes Hahn, and the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini. Their presence had the purpose of providing political legitimacy for the deal, while also pointing out to the indispensable role of international diplomacy in the negotiations leading up to the agreement. In the days following the agreement, it was revealed that other world diplomats had also played a significant role in the process, such as Wess Mitchell, the Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs at the US State Department.

The Prespa Agreement itself was formulated outside the eyes of the public, and without broader political discussion or consultation until the deal was complete. The details regarding the process of negotiation, signing and implementation of the Agreement have also been communicated with a veil of caution and opaqueness. In fact, there was seemingly no significant breakthrough until June 12 (when Zaev and Tsipras held a long phone conversation, which was widely covered in the media). After the phone call, the general parameters of the agreement were made public, and after five days it was signed. Both the Macedonian and the Greek government had previously tested the waters with various potential solutions, aimed at changing the feelings of the masses.

## **Responses**

The signing of the Prespa Agreement was lauded by the two prime ministers and their governments as an act for the history books. Various parts of the establishment shared this attitude – even though the percentage of the elites who cheer the Agreement is higher in Macedonia than in Greece. Yet, as a

contrast, public opinion seems to have remained the same as before, and by that we mean particularly negative – in Greece the majority of citizens are against the Agreement; in Macedonia, the situation is more complex – the majority of ethnic Macedonians are against the deal, while ethnic Albanians support it. Protests against the agreement organized by ethnic Macedonians (have commenced on both sides of the border, which now happen on a regular basis, and are occasionally accompanied by violence, police interventions and arrests. There are frequent protests in Greece as well.

Moreover, on both sides there has been a significant dissatisfaction even within parts of the government. For instance, the junior coalition partner of Syriza, ANEL, has historically adopted a hard line on the name issue, and in the aftermath of the signing of the Prespa Agreement it has repeatedly argued that it is ready to withdraw from the government if necessary – but that for now it remains committed to fixing the Greek economy and politics. Their leader Panos Kamenos, a Greek Minister of Defense may also exercise his leverage during NATO meetings, meaning that despite the Agreement the name issue may not be over yet. In Macedonia, the President Gjorge Ivanov (close to VMRO-DPMNE) has scolded Zaev and Dimitrov, and has not only rejected to sign the Law on Ratification of the Agreement, but has argued that the act of signing the Agreement is violating the Constitution on both procedural and substantive grounds. In response to Ivanov's criticism, Prime Minister Zaev threatened to initiate and impeachment procedure against him in Parliament.

Opposition parties have been particularly vocal in criticizing the Agreement. VMRO-DPMNE has called the deal treacherous. A similar discourse has been adopted by New Democracy in Greece. However, both parties have left space for adopting a more moderate approach in the future, especially since the deal got praised by the EU (and EPP of which they are both part). On the other hand, other smaller parties have been more vehement in opposing the deal, on various grounds – i.e. while conservative forces tried to weaponize patriotic thinking and feelings, those on the far left raise issues such

as self-determination (for example, Levica [The Left] of Macedonia), and issues of external involvement, alluding to the role of EU and NATO in reaching the agreement and the consequences from such move.

On the international level, Western Europeans and Americans have been especially enthusiastic about the Agreement. There have been even suggestions to nominate Tsipras and Zaev for the Nobel Peace Prize. However, the successful diplomacy has so far produced mixed results for Macedonia. While the government of Macedonia got praised by the EU, Macedonia was not able to secure the start of the EU membership negotiations. The reason was that some European countries, most notably France, but also Netherlands and Denmark have voiced their concerns about the lack of substantial reforms, and pushed for a delay in the decision to start pre-accession negotiations. Beyond the legalist logic, there is also a building skeptical sentiment in Europe based on cultural issues and prejudices. Moreover, EU is at a point when it is facing internal troubles, and therefore devote too many resources on the Balkans.

When it comes to NATO, signals have been more convincing for the government in Skopje: NATO in principle is interested to have Macedonia as its 30<sup>th</sup> member. However, the forthcoming NATO summit is poised to be a messy one – marked by Trump's continuous demands that Europeans should spend more on defense. Which leads us to the last question – how do such complex international situations influence Macedonia's EU and NATO bids? The important lesson is that the name issue is not only about domestic, bilateral, or regional affairs – it is also related to big power politics, and arena where Macedonia has no clout whatsoever and depends on the support of others. By betting on the willingness of the Euro-Atlantic community to provide certain compensation for the prospective name change, the Macedonian government has generated a new system of transactional political support, this time beyond the national level; whether this will give way for an ultimate success or ultimate failure remains to be seen.