



## **Weekly Briefing**

**Macedonia External Relations briefing:  
The Prespa Agreement and Macedonia's Referendum in September  
2018: International Significance and External Support for  
Macedonia's Government  
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# **The Prespa Agreement and Macedonia's Referendum in September 2018: International Significance and External Support for Macedonia's Government**

## **Introduction**

In the month of September 2018, Macedonia's referendum on the Prespa Agreement gained immense international attention. Media outlets and pundits from all over the world covered the issue, while a number of diplomats from the EU, NATO and their member countries have flocked to Macedonia, or addressed the Macedonian public from abroad. Representatives of the Macedonian government also had a notable diplomatic activity in this period. This type of international involvement in Macedonia was not unprecedented, but has surpassed the expectations of many. How did Macedonia find itself on the agenda on so many high-level Western diplomats? To contribute towards the understanding of the issue, in this paper I examine two important questions regarding Macedonia's external relations in light of the Prespa Agreement and the Referendum that sought to secure popular consent. First, I discuss the international significance of the Agreement. Second, I list all the major diplomatic interactions between Macedonia and foreign diplomats in September 2018.

## **International Significance of the Prespa Agreement**

The Prespa Agreement is an outcome of a Western-led diplomatic endeavor directed at altering the political dynamics of the Balkan region. Even though the Prespa Agreement was signed and is to be implemented by the governments of Macedonia and Greece, the Skopje-Athens dialogue was moderated and the Agreement was brokered by American and Western European diplomats with the hope to pave the ground for a definite solution to the long-standing name

dispute between the two countries. The solution for the name dispute itself, even though bilateral in nature, has been considered a collective duty for the international community. The mediation between Macedonia and Greece, for instance, took place under the auspices of the United Nations since the early 1990s. The chief mediator for more than 25 years has been Matthew Nimetz, an American lawyer. Other public figures and politicians from Western countries have at different times taken up important role in solving the dispute. According to a report by the Brookings Institution, this time the breakthrough was achieved thanks to the quiet diplomacy of the administration of Donald Trump. A particular role in the process was played by Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Wess Mitchell and the American embassies in Skopje and Athens.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, the Prespa Agreement was not only intended to be a solution to the name issue, but rather a solution to Macedonia's stalled accession to the NATO. In 2008, Greece vetoed Macedonia's accession to the Alliance at the Bucharest Summit, thus rendering previous Agreement between the two sides (signed in 1995) obsolete. After accepting Croatia and Albania as full members at the same Bucharest Summit in 2008, the NATO enlargement in the Balkans was not a priority in the years to come, so Macedonia's bid was put on hold, while the dispute between the two sides soured. However, in recent years, in particular after the crisis in Ukraine in 2013, and the emergence of the discourse on the Russian threat in the West, NATO has continued its expansion to include former socialist countries, including the Balkan countries. Montenegro joined the alliance in 2017. Should Macedonia proceed with the implementation of the Prespa Agreement, it could join NATO by 2020 (as North Macedonia).

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/06/12/diplomacy-triumphs-greece-and-macedonia-resolve-name-dispute/>

The Prespa Agreement is also seen as potentially unlocking Macedonia's EU accession prospects, even though this is not foreseen with the official EU criteria for membership (the name issue is thus an added, political condition unique for Macedonia; while Macedonia has yet to fulfill many of the other conditions regarding reforms of its laws, political system and the economy). The urgency with which the EU has approached the Prespa Agreement, however, matters only to the start of the accession process, and not to the potential accession itself (the EU enlargement towards the Balkans is likely not going to happen in the next ten years). One of the motivations for EU diplomats, nevertheless, has been the hope that a breakthrough in the Balkans will be a good news not only for the enlargement process, but for the Union as a whole – in times when good news are ever scarcer. Moreover, EU diplomats have frequently referred to the threat of increased Russian and Chinese influence in the region, for which, in their view, the only remedy is further advancement of the European path of the region.

However, Macedonia has been only one of the parties to the Prespa Agreement. As the SDSM-DUI government has been particularly dedicated to the accession to NATO and the EU, convincing Macedonian ruling elites to accept the Prespa Agreement was the easier part of the task for Western diplomats. After all, Macedonia's government thought that by accepting the Agreement had little to lose (as the dispute has already had an effect on the NATO-EU bids; and Macedonia has been internationally recognized under a complicated and to many a disparaging reference), and a lot to win – in the first place, international recognition. The complaints by domestic forces that opposed a name change were the only problem in the way, which did not affect the resolve of the Macedonian government and the Western diplomats. For Greece, on the other hand, the situation was more complicated. As the more powerful party of the dispute, the status quo worked for the Greek government, and there was no immediate need to fix the name issue. Any quick solution would prove to be politically costly. In that sense, perhaps Greece was the more difficult nut

to crack, and the change of heart of the Greek government was perhaps more surprising than the change in Skopje. Yet, for the motives and debates in Athens, one could refer to the papers on Greece published on this website.

Finally, the Prespa Agreement happens at a time of global and regional changes. In the broader context, the struggles between the West and Russia, and the emergence of deep US-China frictions have affected the discourse on the referendum. In the Balkans, two developments have created a sense of uncertainty: the proposition of border changes in Serbia and Kosovo, and the US-Turkey fallout (and the subsequent flourishing of the US-Greece relations). From a current perspective, little analysis exists how do these processes interact – at least in Macedonia, the Prespa Agreement is seen as only of national importance.

### **External Support for the Government Ahead of the Referendum**

In September, Macedonia was as never before topic of the news in world media, and welcomed a number of high-level foreign diplomats and leaders. They have more or less conveyed a similar message: that the referendum is a make-or-break for Macedonia's aspirations to join NATO and the EU, and that unless the referendum succeeds (meaning it has sufficient turnout) and that unless the majority votes in favor of the Prespa Agreement (and thereby accept the new name of North Macedonia), Macedonia may further complicate its accession to the EU and NATO, and potentially lose the chance.

The NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, who had met Macedonia's Prime Minister Zoran Zaev frequently in the last few months, visited Skopje on September 5-6. Stoltenberg has called Zaev his friend and has personally commended him on his policies and achievements. At the occasion he repeated his explicit assessment that “NATO is ready” to welcome Macedonia as a 30<sup>th</sup> member state, however he also repeated that the condition for this is the ratification and implementation of the Prespa Agreement. He encouraged Macedonian citizens to turn out massively for the referendum. At the occasion,

Mr Stoltenberg also attended a ceremony that revealed a renaming of a street in downtown Skopje into “Stoltenberg Street.” The aim of the City of Skopje was by renaming the street to honor Mr. Stoltenberg's father, Throvald Stoltenberg, a Norwegian politician, who coordinated the Norwegian assistance for Skopje after the earthquake in 1963.

The Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz visited Skopje on September 7, delivering yet another message of support for the government. Austria is not a NATO member, but staunchly supports Macedonia's accession to the EU. In recent years the foundation of the Skopje-Vienna ties has been the cooperation in handling migration flows. Mr Kurz was known as a supporter of VMRO-DPMNE, but in the last several months he developed warm relations with the Zaev government.

On the Day of Macedonia's Independence, September 8, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel traveled to Skopje. She met Prime Minister Zaev and gave a speech in which she urged Macedonian citizens to turn out to vote. She also met the leader of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski. Merkel's CDU party and VMRO-DPMNE are both part of the same party family in the European Parliament, the European People's Party. In addition to Merkel, in the following days, other high-level officials from Germany visited Macedonia, including Heiko Maas, the German Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Ursula von der Leyen, the German Minister of Defense. This inspired a number of remarks even by German representatives themselves: a popular joke said that if one wanted to talk to a German minister those days, they should have gone to Skopje.

For the occasion of the Independence Day, the US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo sent a greeting in which he congratulated the Government on signing the Prespa Agreement. On September 13, the US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, Wess Mitchell traveled to Skopje, met Zaev, and urged Macedonian citizens to vote. On September 17, the US Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis visited Skopje and met Zaev, Sekerinska and President Ivanov. He echoed the messages of Stoltenberg and Merkel. His

visit however was framed as an attempt to confront Russian influence and meddling in Macedonia. Interestingly around the same time Zaev has claimed there is no evidence of Russian influence. On September 20, Zaev himself traveled to the US, to meet US Vice President Mike Pence, who praised the Prespa Agreement as key to advancing regional security.

The High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini traveled to Skopje on September 13, to express support for the Government and urge citizens to vote. Mogherini also met Mickovski and Ivanov. On September 18, the European Commissioner for Enlargement Negotiations, Johannes Hahn, visited Skopje and conveyed the same message.

The French President Emanuel Macron did not visit Skopje, but addressed the Macedonian public via a special video message. He was perhaps one of the most enthusiastic voices who called not only for a large turnout at the referendum, but also called on Macedonian citizens to vote in favor of the Prespa Agreement. Before him, the French Ambassador to Skopje had made one rather unpleasant remark – he said that the referendum is a choice between “North Macedonia or North Korea.”

Finally, amid all the calls to vote and support the Agreement, Macedonia's President Gjorge Ivanov, in the last days before the referendum, made a statement against the Prespa Agreement and against voting at the referendum – and did it so on the international stage. During a trip to the US in late September, he met with Macedonian diaspora communities and publicly criticized the Prespa Agreement. He doubled down on the criticism during an address to the General Assembly of the United Nations on September 27, when he in addition to criticizing the Agreement, also spoke of Macedonia's denied right to self-determination and argued that its sovereignty has been violated. He himself announced that he will not vote in the referendum, and urged Macedonian citizens to exercise their right of abstaining from the vote too. His speech was met with harsh criticism by the Macedonian government.