




Weekly Briefing

**Macedonia political briefing:
After the Name Change:
What Lies Ahead for the Republic of North Macedonia?
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Introduction

On January 11, 2019, the Macedonian Parliament had its final vote on the Constitutional Amendments stipulated with the Prespa Agreement, that concerned the change of the name of the country into “Republic of North Macedonia.” After weeks of political bargaining, the ruling coalition led by SDSM managed to once again secure the required 2/3 majority in Parliament. On January 25, the Greek parliament voted on the Prespa Agreement; after political bargaining and shuffles in the ruling coalition, the ruling coalition led by Syriza won the vote in favor of the agreement. The Prespa Agreement thus has entered in full force. Since February 12, 2019, Macedonia's new official name now is “Republic of North Macedonia;” the new name is already part of the official communication and correspondence, and is gradually being adopted in international use. In the process, the Macedonian government officials are leading by example – they are adamant about the use of the new name of the country both at home and abroad.

The change of the name of the country is a watershed moment in Macedonia's history. While the consequences of the renaming can be only appropriately analyzed from a historical distance, in this paper we analyze the short-term implications for the country in terms of its domestic political development – in particular, from the perspective of identity politics, and from the perspective of political pragmatism and the challenges ahead for the government in Skopje.

Identity Politics

The full adoption and subsequent implementation of the Prespa Agreement, and in particular the change of the name of Macedonia are expected to bring the long-standing name issue between Skopje and Athens to an end. The final settlement is seen as a compromise with both sides making significant concessions and the two governments paying a relatively high price in their respective domestic contexts. The Macedonian government has done something that has been unimaginable for any previous government – that is the change of the name of the country for universal use. While Greece had less to lose, a compromise on a final solution of the name issue that would allow its northern neighbor to still call itself Macedonia (even with

an adjective) has been also a rather unpopular option for all previous Greek governments, and contested by a significant part of the population.

In Macedonia, most of the debates on the name issue were concerned with the ontological security of the nation. The official position of the Macedonian government is that the Prespa Agreement does not affect the identity of the country, nor the identity of ethnic Macedonians, the largest ethnic group in the country. The Prespa Agreement, in the official Macedonian interpretation, confirms the existence of a Macedonian language, and defines the citizens of Macedonia as “Macedonian/ citizens of North Macedonia.” The codes MK, MKD and the internet code .mk all remain in use as before. One exception will be the registration plates for motor vehicles, who will get a new national code (NMK); this will perhaps allow for Macedonian drivers to avoid any potential tension when driving through Greece. However, these guarantees are not sufficient for a number of ethnic Macedonians who see the Prespa Agreement as a great injustice. They are particularly outraged that with the Agreement, the term “Macedonia without adjectives” is now exclusively associated with the Greek province of Macedonia, and that they still cannot freely use the term “Macedonian” without being contested by Greece. They blame the Macedonian government for having given up national history and culture, as well as brand names that have both symbolic and commercial significance. Officially, with the Prespa Agreement, official and corporate names that bear the name “Macedonia” are now primarily considered to be Greek trademarks, the Macedonian ones will be called “North Macedonia.” At the same time, there is also a significant dissatisfaction in Greece, which is nevertheless out of the scope of this paper.

The acts of naming and referencing themselves are everyday social practices and this is perhaps the trickiest part, and the major hesitation point that prevents from claiming that the name issue has been completely overcome, in particular in the domain of the relations between the Macedonian and the Greek society. For example, Macedonia and Greece had signed the Interim Agreement in 1995, by which Macedonia accepted the provisional reference “the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.” However, in Greece, no one used the reference as such, as most people called the country FYROM, or simply Skopje – which Macedonians find offensive. Likewise, no one in Macedonia free-willingly used the provisional reference from 1995; more even so, there were popular mobilizations to abolish the reference, and calls for universal international recognition of the name of Macedonia. Thus, history teaches us that in terms of the everyday social practice, there will be more continuity than change – as the disgruntled parts of the both societies will not adopt the name “North Macedonia” any time soon (i.e. Macedonians will predominantly continue to say “Republic of Macedonia” while

Greeks will predominantly say “Skopje”). A mobilization in Macedonia started to cross out the adjective “North” from official signs and documents; as a consequence, the sign saying “Welcome to North Macedonia” on the border with Greece has been immediately put under 24 hours police protection. Aside from the (re)naming, other issues are yet to be addressed – that is the revision of history in Macedonian textbooks, but also finding a way to discuss the status of the ethnic Macedonian minority in Greece, which is still unrecognized by the Greek state. All of these issues are likely to cause controversy once they start being discussed.

All in all, while the Prespa Agreement has helped in overcoming the obstacles for Macedonia on the way to NATO and EU, there is still a lot of work to be done in terms of the relations between the two societies, and in terms of appeasing the domestic sentiments. In Macedonia, it seems that the divide between the various factions is insurmountable. While the government takes pride in ending the name dispute with Greece, at least on the short-term, the change of the name of the country will still be a hot topic and a cause for popular mobilization, in particular among ethnic Macedonians. VMRO-DPMNE, the major opposition party, while nominally objecting to the change of the name of the country, will not attempt to revoke the Prespa Agreement even if it comes to power. However, the potential for a new ethno-nationalist movement/ mobilization in opposition to the Agreement is unprecedented. More even so, the renaming of the country coincides with the introduction of Albanian as a second official language, another development that has disgruntled ethnic Macedonians. While such mobilization may not reverse the moves taken by the government, nor it may necessarily lead to a fall of the government, it may deeply affect the Macedonian political stage on the medium and long terms.

Pragmatic Politics

Ever since the independence, the name issue was considered to be the greatest obstacle – and often used as the favorite excuse of Macedonian political elites – for the numerous failures and disappointments throughout the years. The SDSM-DUI government devoted all of its energy and leverage at resolving the name issue, heavily prioritizing it over any other political goal or objective. And while from the perspective of identity politics, the major objection by ethnic Macedonians has been the acceptance of what they see an undignified deal, there have been other sources of contention when it comes to the Prespa Agreement. Most significantly, a number of citizens who would otherwise not object to the Agreement were discontent with the political process of inter-party bargaining in the Parliament, and in particular, the trade-offs

being made by the ruling coalition in exchange for the votes of VMRO-DPMNE MPs in the Parliament. The *de facto* amnesty for a number of VMRO-DPMNE officials in exchange for their votes in favor of the name change has been seen as a defeat by a number of SDSM supporters.

And while the name change in itself is a rather unpopular move, perhaps the only thing that makes it acceptable in the eyes of many otherwise disgruntled citizens (both ethno-nationalists and those disappointed with the political bargaining) is the widespread narrative that it is part of a larger trade-off for the greater good – it is what Macedonia “gets in return” that makes the name change acceptable in the eyes of many who would otherwise not approve it. Externally, the Prespa Agreement is in general lauded as a visionary act contributing to good neighborly relations and stability in the region. The support expressed by Western political elites and the media has given significant political legitimacy to the SDSM-DUI government and helped overcome the negative perceptions. For now, this has secured that the country remains stable and fends off any kind of opposition to the Agreement. Even VMRO-DPMNE, despite nominally objecting to the renaming, has toned down its criticism in an attempt not to come off as opposed to the Western agenda in Macedonia. As the majority of the population has a pro-Western orientation (even the majority of those that object to the renaming, identify themselves as pro-Western), the “conditional acceptance” of Macedonia in the “club” and the promise for accelerating the full membership has had a soothing effect.

With the Prespa Agreement, Macedonia has indeed firmly positioned itself as fully aligned with the West, and has demonstrated unswerving determination to be part of the West. This process will have several outcomes. The most tangible outcome in light of the name change is NATO membership. The Republic of North Macedonia will be the 30th NATO member state, sans anything unpredictable taking place by the NATO summit in December 2019. The prospective NATO membership of the country will be presented as the greatest success of the SDSM-DUI government and the highest point in Macedonia's history, which will further strengthen the position of the government on the short term. Furthermore, the government expects that NATO will enhance the security of the country, and even more importantly, it bets on the idea that a NATO membership will instantly lead to an economic miracle – that is, rapid rise in investment and trade. The government also expects that with the renaming Macedonia will make strides in the process of accession to the EU, which will however be a longer term process. The EU accession is likewise seen as a double victory: both on a symbolic level, and both in terms of an impending economic boom.

The narratives of Macedonia's "Euroatlantic" integration are currently the most potent ones in the political debates and for now keep the nationalist and the anti-corruption critics at bay; at the same time, they are inflating the desires and expectations of the citizens to an unprecedented level. All of this raises the stakes for the SDSM-DUI government as well. In the first place, with the name issue being closed, for now, the government has no more "excuses" and needs to complement the symbolic gains and the foreign policy achievements with results at home as well. The settlement of the name issue, and even the accession to NATO and the steps toward EU membership could easily fade should the promises of economic miracle that will bring about all-around improvement of the livelihood of the people do not start to materialize soon. In that sense, the SDSM-DUI government, in the aftermath of the renaming of Macedonia, is in an unprecedentedly challenging situation: for the first time, a Macedonian government will not have the possibility to blame any potential failures on Greece. With the accession to NATO being in sight, soon the Macedonian government will also lose the option to "postpone" the economic development (e.g. when faced with criticism about the lack of growth, government officials often resort to the trope "wait until we join NATO first"). This is perhaps the greatest benefit from the Prespa Agreement, even though it may not necessarily be the one the government in Skopje desires.