



## **Weekly Briefing**

**North Macedonia external relations briefing:  
Macedonia's external affairs 2019  
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## **Macedonia's external affairs 2019**

### **Introduction**

*In 2019, the Republic of North Macedonia (hereinafter Macedonia) had a vibrant and eventful year when it comes to its external affairs – even if not all of the outcomes were positive in nature. In the spirit of its previous record, the SDSM-led government further engaged into a pro-active foreign policy, with a clear focus on bringing the country closer to the achieving the strategic goal of double integration of the country in the EU and NATO. The key milestone on the way to realizing this goal was the successful conclusion of the Prespa Agreement, which in practice meant implementing the uneasy task of renaming the country into North Macedonia.*

*Nevertheless, after Macedonia had indeed successfully underwent the process of renaming, and almost locked in its accession to NATO, it became apparent that there will be additional challenges on its way to the EU. These challenges stem from the broader and quite complex intra-European political divisions (i.e. the attitudes of various EU member states' governments on the issue of EU enlargement). This has complicated Macedonia's external affairs agenda, and forced the government to find solutions for the newly emerging problems, one of them being pursuing closer regional cooperation with Serbia and Albania. At the same time, in 2019 Macedonia had difficulties in maintaining good-neighborhood relations with Bulgaria (i.e. the implementation of the Macedonian-Bulgarian agreement on good neighborly relations from 2017, especially the aspects of it that touch upon symbolic issues and the interpretation of history).*

*As a consequence, Macedonia also had a very limited focus in its foreign relations in 2019, devoting all of its resources on the neighborhood and the Euro-Atlantic integration; everything else was completely subordinated to these primary strategic goals. While 2019 was a year of increasing tensions between the big powers and growing uncertainty on the global stage, there was little debate and adjustment of the positions of the government in Skopje – rather, the government was led by the understanding that Macedonia is too small and overburdened with its own problems to care about the big questions. Needless to say, the Macedonian government also did not debate nor produced any global vision, nor policy on issues of global/ transnational relevance, such as climate change or the fourth industrial revolution, nor it tried to adjust to the new trends in international relations, such as the hollowing out of multilateralism and the rise of economic nationalism and protectionism. For*

*the government in Skopje, the world in 2019 remained unchanged – and the government remained fully committed in finding its own place in it, or rather attempting to claim the place Macedonian elites consider to rightly belong to them as part of the West.*

### **Concluding the Name Issue**

After a tumultuous political process which included a failed referendum (despite a huge domestic campaign and immense international support) and after the controversies surrounding the poaching of several MPs from the opposition VMRO-DPMNE to support the Constitutional amendments to rename the country (in exchange for more lenient treatment in grand corruption cases), the SDSM-led government managed to pull what had previously seemed impossible – that is to solve the name issue with Greece, while also remaining in power, and having its candidate win the Presidential elections, thereby fortifying its position as a ruling party and consolidating its foreign policy capacities. This outcome seemed even more extra-ordinary if one takes in account the asymmetrical nature of the solution of the name issue – while Macedonia was the party committing to undertaking substantial changes, the final approval of the Agreement depended on the outcome of the voting in the Greek parliament.

To a certain extent, the intentions behind the name change was to restore and improve Macedonia's international standing and the reputation in the eyes of the West. In 2019, this goal was achieved. The renaming of the country was received as a positive news among the international community. The SDSM-led government and in particular former Prime Minister Zoran Zaev and the Minister of Foreign Affairs Nikola Dimitrov won the sympathies of the international commentariat and were praised on a number of occasions for their role in solving the name issue. Zaev was even considered to be nominated alongside his Greek counter-part Alexis Tsipras for the Nobel Peace Prize.

There were more than just symbolic gains for the government in Skopje – the most tangible win came in the form of the ratification of Macedonia's NATO accession protocol by almost all NATO members in the course of the year. However, not all countries managed to ratify the protocol before the December 2019 NATO Summit – so the official accession was moved for 2020. The EU accession process however was more rocky. Although Macedonia won the praise and support by both the European Commission and most of the EU member countries, this did not translate to opening of the accession talks in 2019 (as it will be elaborated below).

While the long-term goal of making the move was to secure the Euro-Atlantic future of the country, the immediate effect of the change of the name was normalization of the relations with Greece. In April 2019, Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras made a landmark visit to Skopje – the first visit by a Greek head of government to the nation's capital. He was accompanied by a large business delegation. The visit was supposed to make a breakthrough not just in terms of overcoming the symbolic conflict between the two sides, but also in unleashing cross-border economic cooperation. Greece committed to support Macedonia's accessions to EU and NATO, and to forge close security cooperation. Soon after the solution of the name issue, Greece also joined the China-led 17+1 platform and announced willingness to cooperate with Macedonia within the Belt and Road framework.

However, Tsipras and his Syriza coalition lost the elections in Greece later in the year, and was succeeded by Konstantinos Mitsotakis of Nea Demokratia. ND had profiled itself as a critic of the Prespa Agreement and initially the Macedonian government feared that this may complicate the cross-border relations. However, while maintaining a critical tone, the ND government in Greece did not renege on the promises made by Tsipras and Syriza – although it was notable that after the government change, there was a significant drop in the Greek enthusiasm for advancing the relationship with Macedonia. Yet, for the government in Skopje, even half-hearted support from Athens in the post-election period was more than sufficient. What Skopje did not foresee, however, was the (re)opening of other questions that complicated its external affairs agenda.

### **Hurdles on the Way Forward, and Consolation**

Once the government solved the name issue, the assumption was that the accession talks with the EU would start as soon as possible. After all, this was also the promise given by a number of high-profile European policymakers on the eve of the referendum on the name change in 2018. However, by Summer 2019 it became clear that there would be further delays down the road. Some voices in the EU were particularly concerned about the question of the rule of law in Macedonia. Moreover, as the enlargement discussion focused on both Macedonia and Albania as a package – while some EU countries found the opening of accession talks with Albania particularly problematic – Macedonia suffered the consequences as a collateral. By Fall 2019, the opposition to the start of the talks with Macedonia was mostly alleviated, and Macedonia was “decoupled” from Albania in the EU enlargement discourse – nevertheless, the French government in particular remained opposed to the idea of opening the accession talks

due to dissatisfaction with the methodology of accession talks and the system of oversight. As a result, not even in Fall 2019 Macedonia did not manage to start the accession talks with the Union. This was a huge blow for the government, which led to the calling of early elections scheduled for April 2020.

Moreover, in 2019, while Macedonia smoothed over the relations with Greece, new cracks emerged in the relations with Bulgaria. After having signed a treaty on good neighborly relations in 2017, Macedonia and Bulgaria embarked on a process of building mutual trust, and solving some of the most contentious symbolic issues, such as the reconciliation of contested historical narratives. However, in 2019 it became obvious that misunderstanding and mistrust persist. After the impasse between the members of a joint commission on the issue of re-interpretation of the national histories of the two sides, there was renewed friction between the two governments. In particular, the Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov and some ministers in his cabinet had warned that unless Macedonia embraces a more constructive approach, they are ready to object and problematize Macedonia's EU accession. Fortunately for the government in Skopje, however, the tensions with Bulgaria remained only vaguely hovering over the country's foreign relations, and for now have not led to any tangible consequences.

Not all in 2019 was bad news for Macedonia's external relations. An important development was the launch of the so called Mini Schengen initiative, an effort aimed to facilitate regional integration and cooperation, and in particular to facilitate the free movement of people and goods between Serbia, Albania and Macedonia, with potential expansion of the format to include Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro. The initiative was established in Fall 2019, once it became clear that the EU accession bids of Macedonia and Albania are stalling. Former Prime Minister Zaev had several meetings with his counterpart from Albania, Edi Rama, as well as with the Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, under the banner of the new regional cooperation platform. It remains to be seen how the Mini Schengen will work out in practice.