



Progress in resolving the Greek-Macedonian name dispute: Will it break the Gordian knot at last?

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Some might argue that Macedonia is being asked to pay an unduly heavy price simply for the sake of starting EU accession negotiations, while others will believe that the Agreement reached last weekend is well worth that price.

Of all the many bilateral disputes that continue to cast a shadow over the Western Balkan region, none is more symbolic of the deep-rooted legacy of history and the politics of identity and nationalism that pervade the region than the dispute that has divided the two neighbouring countries, Greece and Macedonia, for decades and more recently since the latter's independence in 1991 following the break-up of the former Yugoslavia.

Greece, whose northern province is also called Macedonia, used every opportunity to make clear its objection to what it perceived as the appropriation by Macedonia of the heritage of Alexander the Great, and what it called its "irredentist behaviour". Macedonia's admission to the UN under the provisional name of the "former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" was blocked for over a year until 1993. The Interim Agreement of 1995 lifted the 20-month Greek blockade against Macedonia and committed both sides to continue negotiations under UN auspices and enjoined Greece from blocking Macedonia's application for membership in other international bodies as long as it did so under the provisional name.

Under the patient guidance of the UN mediator Matthew Nimetz appointed in 1995, various attempts were made over the years to find a compromise solution. These intensified in the run-up to the 2008 NATO Summit when Macedonia expected to be admitted as a new member alongside Croatia and Albania. But because of Greece's continued objections despite the Interim Agreement of 1995, only Croatia and Albania were admitted. This dealt a severe blow to Macedonia's foreign policy aspirations, and resulted in a hardening of the populist behaviour of the then Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski. The latter had already infuriated his Greek neighbours by renaming the Skopje city airport Alexander the Great airport in the previous year.

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Although he initiated contacts with George Papandreou, the newly elected Prime Minister of Greece in 2009, Gruevski used the continuing dispute as a barely disguised fig leaf for his increasingly authoritarian rule and a massive building spree in Skopje. This included a 23-metre statue euphemistically called “warrior on a horse”, but clearly meant as a symbol of Alexander the Great. Using financial resources that the country could ill afford, Gruevski sought to portray himself through these monumental works of dubious quality and design as the defender of the Macedonian identity. Mr Gruevski is now facing a two-year prison sentence for corruption, which he is appealing, and four other charges of alleged abuse of power, electoral fraud, violation of public procurement laws and criminal behaviour against the public order.

Breakthrough of historic significance

It has taken a new leader to bring Macedonia back on track with a return to the rule of law. After just over a year in power, the new coalition government led by Zoran Zaev has launched major reform programmes to catch up on time lost during the previous regime.

The Prime Minister also resumed efforts to resolve the name dispute. Using the diplomatic skills of the newly appointed Foreign Minister, Nikola Dimitrov, the new government ditched the hitherto ethno-nationalist approach towards Greece and established a level and tone of dialogue not seen for many years. This led to the first meeting between Zaev and his counterpart Alexis Tsipras in the margins of the Davos Economic Forum in late January 2018.

After successive meetings between the two foreign ministers and various communications between the two prime ministers, a final agreement was announced by both sides on June 12th and formally signed on June 17th.

The agreement reached has been hailed by the international community as a landmark achievement, making the “impossible possible”, to quote European Council President Donald Tusk. If the agreement is ratified by the Macedonian Parliament, the Greek government is committed to recommending the lifting of all obstacles to NATO accession and the start of EU accession negotiations.

Some might argue that Macedonia is being asked to pay an unduly heavy price for the sake of EU accession negotiations to start, while others will believe that it is worth that price.

This was a dispute which from the outset lacked a level playing field. Greece used every opportunity to demonstrate that as a NATO and EU member, it could dictate the terms of the negotiations. The text of the final agreement does give the impression of a one-sided agreement, with most of the obligations having to be assumed by one side only – Macedonia.

The Agreement

What does the text of the agreement as published entail?¹ Among its most salient provisions are the following:

- The agreed name for Macedonia will be “Republic of North Macedonia”, to be used *erga omnes*; the short name will be “North Macedonia”.
- The nationality will be Macedonian/citizen of Republic of North Macedonia, to be registered in all travel documents.
- The official language will be Macedonian.
- The Constitution of Macedonia will have to be changed by the end of 2018, in order to incorporate the new name in all areas.

What the text also stipulates is a distinct differentiation between the “Macedonian” or “Slavic” culture and the “Hellenic” culture. It draws a red line through history as if to delineate what is “Slavic culture” and what is “Hellenic culture”, stating that there is no relationship between the two, whether it relates to “history, civilisation, culture and heritage”. It even goes into minute detail about what North Macedonia is required to do with regard to “existing monuments, public buildings and infrastructure” (...) “which refer in any way to Hellenic history and civilization constituting an integral component of the historic or cultural patrimony of (Greece)”.

In an agreement meant to resolve the name dispute, was it necessary to go into so much detail to distinguish between what is “Slavic culture” and what is “Hellenic culture”, as if they have for centuries been living on different planets and not next-door neighbours?

The words “shared values”, “shared heritage” or “equality” appear nowhere in the text of the final agreement, although it does refer to the agreement being guided by the principles of “democracy, fundamental freedoms, respect for human rights and dignity”, etc., in accordance with the relevant UN, OSCE and Council of Europe Conventions. Perhaps this would have been a step too far for the Greek side where the voices against any deal have been vociferous. It should not be forgotten, however, that Greece is not a party to those Council of Europe texts relating to rights of minorities, recognising only the Muslim minority under the 1923 Lausanne Treaty.

The agreement provides for the establishment of both a “Joint Inter-disciplinary Committee of Experts on historic, archaeological and educational matters”, and a “High Level Cooperation Council” to promote cooperation in economic, transport, education, culture and many other areas. But with a starting point of ‘separate’ as opposed to ‘shared’ culture and heritage, a major effort will be required to make sure that these bodies will be able to function in a spirit of good faith to promote reconciliation between both sides. This is where the hard work really begins.

¹ For an English translation of the agreement released by the Greek government on June 16th, see <http://www.ekathimerini.com/resources/article-files/agliko-1.pdf>

The agreement will now be submitted to the Macedonian Parliament for ratification. A referendum is expected in the autumn. Ratification by Greece will follow, once Macedonia has completed all constitutional changes, another sign of the asymmetrical approach.

Tracing the battle lines

Already the battle lines of the campaign are being drawn. The President of Macedonia, Mr Ivanov, has announced that he will refuse to have anything to do with this agreement, a view shared by the main opposition party VMRO-DPMNE, whose former leader was Gruevski. This was to be expected, with the political divide between government and opposition being as sharp as ever. Without political consensus, it will make the government's task of convincing the public of the merits of this agreement all the more difficult. Another added difficulty is that the Macedonian government is accused of not having respected its own red lines in the negotiations, i.e. that it would not accept any change in the Constitution.

The government has also been accused of a lack of transparency in the negotiating process. While a level of secrecy in such sensitive negotiations is understandable, greater efforts in keeping the opposition informed at every stage of the process and in initiating a public debate would have helped in mitigating the criticisms.

It now has a major task of convincing the public on the merits of its approach and on the agreement reached. It must convince the citizens that their Macedonian identity and culture remains intact with this agreement. To be successful it will need to involve all the major actors in society, in particular academia, the churches, media and all sectors of civil society at national and local level. The referendum following the Northern Ireland peace agreement of April 1998 offers a good example in this respect. Maximum transparency and openness from the government will be necessary to allow the public to voice their feelings without restrictions. This freedom was always refused by the previous government under Gruevski, which considered any discussion on the name issue to be against the interests of the country.

Huge stakes for North Macedonia

With the new openness and inclusive governance approach adopted by this government since it took up office a year ago, there is every hope that the debate will enable the people to reach a mature decision that will strengthen the democratic and moral fibre of the country as it faces the future within the EU family.

Should the forthcoming European Council give the green light to set a date for the opening of accession negotiations, as recommended by the European Commission, this will give a boost to the chances of this agreement going forward. Failure to do so, however, could make that Gordian knot even tighter, and undermine the government's future, while those in Greece who are dead-set against the agreement will probably feel vindicated.