

The Current Macedonian Issue between Athens and Skopje: Is there an Option for a Breakthrough?



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Summary

The present paper

- analyses the 16-year old Balkan diplomatic imbroglio over the name issue of "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" (FYROM), from the UN Security Council resolution 817/1993 calling for the resolution of the issue "in the interest of maintaining peaceful and good-neighbourly relations in the region", to the *communiqué* of the April 2008 Bucharest NATO Summit specifying that FYROM would be admitted to the Alliance "as soon as a mutually acceptable solution to the name issue has been reached";
- initiates a discourse with the assessments and proposals of a recent report of the International Crisis Group, *Macedonia's Name: Breaking the Deadlock*;
- attempts to clarify current Greek positions and concerns *vis-à-vis* the various proposals on the state name submitted by UN mediator Matthew Nimetz;
- submits a comprehensive proposal for dealing, in an international environment, with such sensitive issues as those affecting personal, state, regional and cultural identities.

The diplomatic imbroglio

The diplomatic controversy between Athens and Skopje over the appellation "Macedonia" has entered its 18th year. Back in April 1993 the UN Security Council had issued a balanced resolution (817/1993), which *inter alia* admitted the country to the UN under the provisional name "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" (FYROM), acknowledged that the controversy over the name "needs to be resolved in the interest of maintaining peaceful and good-neighbourly relations in the region", and offered the good services of the organization to the parties to find a compromise solution.

To many foreign observers the emergence of the "name issue", at a time when wars were ravaging in former Yugoslavia, appeared as a nuisance or, at best, a typical Balkan paradox. In subsequent years, however, ineffective efforts by UN mediators and fruitless bilateral negotiations revealed that beneath the surface of the state name issue thorny problems thrived: territorial claims, identity clashes, conflicting historical/cultural interpretations, painful wounds inflicted by the Greek Civil War on both sides.

In 1995, the signing of the Athens-Skopje *Interim Accord* offered hopes for building good neighbourly relations, which would assist in resolving the issue of the name. Nevertheless, ten years later, despite proposals by successive Greek governments to find a compromise solution, no progress was recorded as the other side responded with evasively tactics. Skopje aimed to gain time in order to silently bypass the UN procedure to negotiate with individual countries the recognition of its constitutional name, "Republic of Macedonia" (see Kofos-Vlasidis 2005).

In 2004, the new Greek government of *Nea Demokratia* under Prime Minister Kostas Karamanlis expressed a desire to break the impasse. By publicly bypassing the "maximal" Greek position, which objected to any use of the Macedonian name by the neighbouring country, it indicated its willingness to agree to a compound name.

UN mediator Matthew Nimetz grasped the opportunity and sought to revitalize the dormant and ineffectual ten-year old negotiating procedure. From April 2005 to April 2008 he tabled a series of proposals, usually contradictory to each other, seeking to stimulate concessions by both parties. It was all in vain. Neither side appeared willing to back up from its own "red lines".

Meanwhile, Greece's position had suffered an unexpected setback. The second-term Bush Administration, bypassing Athens, officially endorsed the name "Republic of Macedonia" for its bilateral relations with Skopje. The options left to the Greek government were either to "capitulate" or bring the issue to a brink. Instead, it opted for a final resort to the "carrot" tactic. This approach included economic, political and at times military support, which the former PASOK government under Prime Minister Kostas Simitis had adopted, in a vain effort to encourage the northern neighbour to agree on a compromise solution. This time, Greece's inducement took the form of endorsement of FYROM acquiring EU candidate status.

Although the "carrot" was well received, no change of any substance was visible in Skopje's position on the name issue. Furthermore, on the negative side, the 2007 national elections had brought to power the right-centre party of VMRO/DPMNE, under a young leader, Nikola Gruevski, who had campaigned on an extreme nationalist platform. Once in government, rhetoric turned into official policy. To the astonishment of foreign observers, airports, stadiums, city streets and even main highways were re-named after figures of the ancient Greek Macedonian pantheon. In a number of cities public squares were adorned with statues of Alexander the Great and his father Philip II, while government literature and school textbooks popularized the new ethnogenetic dogma of the Slav Macedonians tracing it back to classical times. Through the internet and blogs it did not take long before such provocative misrepresentations of Greek cultural heritage and identity touched upon sensitive chores, raising havoc, particularly among the *Makedones* of Greek Macedonia. It was a foregone

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conclusion that public pressure on the Athens government, enjoying a mere one vote majority in the Greek Parliament, could hardly pass unnoticed.

Meanwhile, apart from the nationalist propaganda at home and abroad, the new government in Skopje put an end to any compromise formulas presented during the ongoing Nimetz negotiations. Appearing confident under the Bush Administration's umbrella, FYROM joined Croatia and Albania, petitioning for NATO membership. Greece had no alternative but to explain frankly to its allies the need for a prospective candidate member to resolve first its differences with a long-time member before being admitted to the Alliance. At the NATO Bucharest Summit in April 2008, the Greek prime minister this time did not need to raise a "stick" – i.e. a veto. His arguments, supported by the opposition parties in the Greek Parliament and the Greek public, were convincing. The unanimous *communiqué*, in the presence of President Bush, stipulated that an invitation to Skopje "will be extended as soon as a **mutually acceptable** solution to the name issue has been reached".

It is by now clear, that as far as NATO is concerned the name issue needs to be resolved prior to FYROM's admittance to the Alliance. Furthermore, the decision has set a precedent, which cannot be ignored in view of the admittance of FYROM to the EU. By the same token, it is a foregone conclusion that future Greek governments and, more so, the Greek parliament can hardly be expected to go beyond the line set out by the NATO heads of state and government.

In the aftermath of the Bucharest conference, despite certain sober voices in Skopje to proceed with meaningful negotiations with Greece, the nationalist Gruevski government decided instead to raise the stakes by adopting polemical rhetoric against Greece on a number of side issues. Reverting to the old role of a "small", "weak" country, "bullied" by a "strong" neighbour, it sought the support of former *chaperons*, who had been supportive during the Kosovo crisis era and the Yugoslav wars. Athens was accused not merely of blocking membership of the country to international organizations, but was also charged of having sinister thoughts of strangulating the ethnic identity of the "Macedonian" people and of oppressing a so-called "Macedonian" minority in Greece. By extending, however, at this moment, the difference over the state name into the murky terrain of identities certainly does not augur well for resolving the issue in the near future.

A Greek dialogue with the *International Crisis Group*

In the early 2000s, at a time of an escalating armed conflict between Slav and Albanian Macedonians, certain international agencies – official, semi-official or independent – operating in the Balkans sought to avert the spread of fighting in the region. Among them was the Brussels-based *International Crisis Group (ICG)*. With the Kosovo issue just "resolved", their efforts aimed at cajoling Slav Macedonians to yield to Albanian demands for an expanded role in the administration of the country and certain special rights for the Albanian community. In return, they offered as "compensation" to the Slav Macedonians a sizeable *ICG report*, which purported to satisfy their claims on the name issue at the expense of the Greeks. Nevertheless, international developments at the time, fanned by the "war on terrorism", refocused the interest of the international community, particularly the U.S., away from the Balkans.

The 2008 NATO membership debacle brought once again to the scene the "old hands", offering their "good offices". This time, however, the arrogance, which marked former reports, was significantly tempered. Such is the case with a recent study issued by the ICG entitled *Macedonia's Name: Breaking the Deadlock*. Its alleged aim is to provide a set of proposals for the two parties to reach an agreement. In fact, it seeks to clear the way for "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" to join NATO and eventually the EU.

Its reasoning is based on the assumption that the acceptance of its proposals (i) will help avert the destabilization of the region; (ii) will compensate the Slav Macedonians for concessions to which they were coerced to make to the Albanian Macedonians; and (iii) will honour promises to Skopje (mainly by the Bush Administration) for entering NATO and eventually the EU.

To construct their arguments, the authors of the report attempt to meet at some point certain Greek arguments and grievances. They (i) criticize certain attitudes and actions emanating from Skopje, which offend Greek sensitivities, mainly over historical and identity issues; (ii) acknowledge the overwhelming Greek public support to current Greek government positions; and (iii) conclude by proposing the "Republic of North Macedonia" as a suitable name for international usage – a name that, under certain conditions, the Greek government might be willing to consider. Of course, a basic prerequisite for Athens is that the agreed name should apply *erga omnes*, i.e. for all purposes, by all.

However, at the same time, the authors offer a set of exclusions to the use of the proposed name, which are likely, in the long run, to render the "international" name obsolete, similar to the currently fossilized, temporary name of "FYROM". Moreover, the authors adopt Skopje's escalating arguments that the resolution of the problem with the country's name should also take into consideration and adopt the derivatives of Macedonia – i.e. "Macedonian" language, ethnicity, products etc. – without any suffix, prefix or compound of terms. According to the ICG authors, compromise on these issues on the part of Skopje is "out of the question".

Going carefully through the report, one remains with the impression that its authors are shying away from tackling the core of the problem. Their concern is to provide a semblance of a balanced proposal simply in order to encourage international "actors" to reverse the Bucharest unanimous decision of NATO leaders and encourage FYROM's membership in the EU.

Apart from the new state name, the proposal aims at "rebuilding" trust on the basis of three guidelines:

- Skopje should "desist from moves ... offending Greek sensitivities about the Hellenic heritage".
- Both sides should examine treatment of their "common history of the region from ancient (sic) times to modern times".
- Pending an agreement on the name, Skopje should use the provisional name (FYROM) in multilateral forums and, in response, Greece should "drop its threat to veto Macedonia's membership of NATO and accession negotiations with the EU".

With trust restored, the international actors should apply "pressure" on both parties, "especially Greece", in order to retreat from its alleged "maximal" positions.

The ICG has been known for its well-researched reports over the years. The current one, however,

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II The Greek government favours a compound geographical name for their neighbour country.

II The geographical region of Macedonia, which includes the entire region of "Greek Macedonia", is not and cannot be considered the "tatkovina" (fatherland) of the Makedonski people living in FYROM.

II Slav Macedonians need to realize that their newly conceived ethnogenetic dogma, extending to classical antiquity, encroaches upon the Hellenic cultural heritage and the identity of their Greek neighbours to the south.

despite the efforts of the contributors, reveals certain serious lacunae *vis-à-vis* current Greek concerns and perceptions of the problem, which require certain clarifications:

- The official Greek position in no way can be viewed today as a "maximal" one. With considerable political cost, political elites in the country have overrun public feelings about the use of the Macedonian name by the neighbouring country. The Greek government as well as all major parties favour a compound geographical name for their neighbour country, provided its state name clearly defines Macedonian regions within its own jurisdiction. The current constitutional name, "Macedonia", is, however, identical with the name of the wider geographic region "Macedonia". Of this region, roughly 52 per cent is Greek territory, 9 per cent Bulgarian and 1,5 per cent Albanian. UN negotiator Matthew Nimetz has apparently realized that such a tautology of the names for two different geographical regions could become a harbinger for expansionist claims. His latest proposal, "North Macedonia", although it might tentatively provide a way out of the current impasse, certainly is not a perfect one, as it might convey the impression of a divided country.
- The second development was the disappointment of the Greeks over the course of the negotiations following the signing of the 1995 *Interim Accord*, which regulated their mutual relations, minus the differences over the name. In their view, despite the fact that they extended a generous helping hand to the Slav Macedonians (economic, political, diplomatic and even military) during the 10-year duration of the *Interim Accord*, Skopje failed to contribute in finding a mutually acceptable solution.
- The third, and even more disturbing development to Greek public opinion, particularly to the Greek Macedonians, was a re-appraisal of the ethnogenetic dogma of the "Macedonian" ethnicity. In their view, the state controlled educational system in FYROM, by extending the historical roots of the new nation to classical antiquity, was encroaching upon an illustrious past, which had been recorded in the annals of Hellenic heritage almost a millennium prior to the arrival of Slavic tribes in the region. The Greeks, particularly the *Makedones*, feel that a cherished human right, their right to their heritage and identity is in jeopardy. Moreover, by claiming the entire geographic Macedonian region of modern times as their "tatkovina" (fatherland), Slav Macedonians laid claim to everything Macedonian. As a result, the new generation, graduating school after the emergence of an independent Macedonian state in 1991, have espoused the new dogma, which those over 45 are at a loss to comprehend.
- The emergence of a new generation of politicians in Skopje, belonging to the nationalist VMRO-DPMNE party, some of them with family roots in Greek Macedonia, brought to the surface issues and grievances dating back to the years of the Greek Civil War of 1945-1949. For the past two decades, the Greeks have managed to mend fences of their savage fratricidal war. Nevertheless, in FYROM third generation descendants of the so-called "Egejski" refugees, including the current Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, attempt to rekindle the travails of that period. The Greeks are certainly aware of the role of Tito's Yugoslavia, and more so of the Slav Macedonian

nationalists of Skopje at the time, in fanning the armed conflict in Greece, hoping to profit themselves. By now, it is well known that the price for the Yugoslav support to the Greek communist insurrection was Greek Macedonia. In the midst of negotiations over the "name issue" to reopen such old wounds would hardly be productive to people on both sides of the border.

To paraphrase slightly the ICG report, it is evident that no matter how "mystifying the dispute appears to outsiders" – with partial knowledge of the issue – it touches "existential nerves" in both Macedonias: the independent state, i.e. "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia", and the EU region of "Greek Macedonia" of the Hellenic Republic.

Conclusions and recommendations

In order to resolve the dispute, one has to approach constructively those "existential" elements, which are of particular concern to both parties. It is evident that the dispute is not simply the state name of Greece's neighbour, it is what is conveyed through it.

Skopje – and third parties offering their services for a compromise solution – need to understand that the geographical region of Macedonia, which includes the entire region of "Greek Macedonia", is not and cannot be considered the "tatkovina" (fatherland) of the *Makedonski* people living in FYROM. **This is a red line for Greece and the Greeks!**

Similarly, Slav Macedonians need to realize that their newly conceived ethnogenetic dogma, extending to classical antiquity, encroaches upon the Hellenic cultural heritage and the identity of their Greek neighbours to the south. As such, **it threatens to ignite a clash of identities in the region as a whole.**

The use of the Macedonian name as a state appellation in no way confers the right to appropriate everything and anything derived from or pertained to the entire region of Macedonia. This needs **to be legally clarified and remain binding erga omnes.**

The task ahead is the search for enduring solutions to outstanding issues. Otherwise, typical "diplomatic" escape clauses would bequest the problem to future generations.

Consequently, the following concluding proposals aspire to complement the ICG report and furnish food for thought for other aspirant "mediators":

- The state name needs specifically to refer to and describe the present region of FYROM. It should apply *erga omnes* in multilateral and bilateral international relations and transactions and should be observed by all organizations, states, and other non-governmental international organizations, including the government and the agencies of FYROM. **In this writer's opinion, the parties should accept the name used by the inhabitants of FYROM for their region of geographical Macedonia, i.e. *Vardar Macedonia*, or preferably *Vardar Makedonija*.**
- Its derivatives should, naturally, follow the agreed state name. State identity cards, passports etc. would inscribe the citizenship in accordance to the state name.
- Issues touching upon the self-identification of persons, which includes their ethnicity and their right to identify themselves, should be respected. This means that their name, *Makedontsi*, by which they identify themselves in their language, should be respected in all foreign languages, including the Greek. A similar

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- arrangement might apply to the use of *Makedones* for the Greek Macedonians.
- Both parties should accept the principle that their respective Macedonian versions must be clearly identified for international usage. Once they consent on this principle, they could jointly address the international bodies to endorse and abide by their agreement.
 - Finally, the international community needs to share its responsibility for resolving the name issue. After all, it is partially the culprit. Through the use of leading international languages – English, French, German and so on – they translate four different identities of Macedonian/Macedonians by one and the same name, "Macedonian". The issue at hand is not merely one of semantics. Whoever succeeds to impose on foreign languages its own version of "Macedonian" acquires international monopoly for its use (see Kofos 2005).
 - In order to overcome the name problem two solutions seem possible. (1) One would be to employ a traditional method and add to the respective Macedonian versions an appropriate prefix: Slav-

Macedonian/s, Greek-Macedonian/s, Bulgarian-Macedonian/s or Albanian-Macedonian/s. (2) A second approach would be to apply in international languages the derivatives of the various Macedonian versions in the original form of the respective local languages. Thus, the Slavic terms *Makedontsi* (noun) and *Makedonski* (adjective) would be transferred to English and other languages in an un-translated Latin alphabet (for example: "the Makedontsi immigrated to the United States..."; "The Makedonski language..."). Similarly, the Greek terms *Makedones* (noun) and *Makedonikos* (adjective) could be adopted to identify the Greek variant of the Macedonian name (see also Box below).

- Reaching an agreement under UN auspices on all these issues the parties will replace their 1995 *Interim Accord* with a "Permanent" one. A treaty, which will be patterned on the *acquis communautaire* of the European Union, with Athens assuming the obligation to support the candidate country becoming an equal partner and ally in international organizations to which Greece is an active member.

Box: The different meanings and identities of the term "Macedonian"

There is considerable confusion and ambiguity over the derivatives of the term "Macedonian". This has to do with the circumstance that there are numerous ethnic, regional, cultural, historical and legal (citizenship) variants of both the noun "Macedonians" and the adjective "Macedonian".

The noun "Macedonians"

In FYROM the noun *Macedonians* (*Makedonci* – *Makedontsi* – in the local Slavic language) identifies, (a) in the legal sense, all citizens of the Republic (including Slavs, Albanians, Greeks, Roma etc), and (b) in the ethnic/national sense, a million and a half local Slavs.

In Greece the noun *Macedonians* (*Μακεδόνες* – *Makedones* – in the Greek language) identifies, in the regional/cultural sense, almost two and a half million ethnic Greeks of the region of Greek Macedonia.

In Bulgaria the same name *Macedonians* (*Makedonci* – *Makedontsi* – in Bulgarian) identifies, in the regional sense, hundreds of thousands of ethnic Bulgarian.

To complicate matters further, there is a fourth, historical dimension of the name *Macedonians*, which refers to the first "owners" of the name, i.e. the Greek-speaking people who inhabited roughly the region of present-day Greek Macedonia in classical times and identified themselves as *Μακεδόνες* (*Makedones*) in their Greek language.

The adjective "Macedonian"

The adjective *Macedonian* derives: (a) from the noun of the geographical region Macedonia, and (b) from the noun of the name of the people in its regional, ethnic, historical variants as described above. As such, the Macedonian adjective describes identities of persons (Macedonian community, minority, people, personalities), abstract values (Macedonian history, culture, traditions), institutions/associations (Macedonian administrative, scientific, professional, educational, civic, business/commercial, religious), as well as tangible objects and items (products, publications, etc).

In the Slavonic languages of FYROM and Bulgaria the adjective *Macedonian*, both in its ethnic and regional provenance is spelled in an identical form as *makedonski*. On the other hand, in the Greek language the same adjective *Macedonian*, in its regional/cultural/historical context, appears as *makedonikos* (-i or -o for the feminine and neuter endings).

Source: Evangelos Kofos, *The Controversy over the terms 'Macedonians' and 'Macedonian': A probable exit scenario*, Southeast European and Black Sea Studies, Vol. 5, No.1, January 2005.

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