

## The Macedonian “Name” Dispute: The Macedonian Question—Resolved?

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### Abstract

The dispute between Greece and the newly formed state referred to as the “Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” that emerged out of the collapse of Yugoslavia in 1991 was a major source of instability in the Western Balkans for more than 25 years. It was resolved through negotiations between Athens and Skopje, mediated by the United Nations, resulting in the Prespa (or Prespes) Agreement, which was signed on June 17, 2018, and ratified by both parliaments amid controversy in their countries. The underlying issues involved deeply held and differing views relating to national identity, history, and the future of the region, which were resolved through a change in the name of the new state and various agreements as to identity issues. The author, the United Nations mediator in the dispute for 20 years and previously the United States presidential envoy with reference to the dispute, describes the basis of the dispute, the positions of the parties, and the factors that led to a successful resolution.

**Keywords:** Macedonia; Greece; North Macedonia; “Name” dispute

The Macedonian “name” dispute was, to most outsiders who somehow were faced with trying to understand it, certainly one of the more unusual international confrontations. When the dispute was resolved through the Prespa Agreement between Greece and (now) the Republic of North Macedonia in June 2018, most outsiders (as frequently expressed to me, the United Nations mediator for 20 years) responded, “Why did it take you so long?”

And yet, as protracted conflicts go, the Macedonian “name” dispute is instructive as to the types of issues that go to the heart of a people’s identity and a nation’s sense of security. In this case, determining the name of a newly independent state involved profound issues relating to the identity of two distinct peoples and their differing views of history, culture, and the future of their region. Resolving the “name” dispute between Greece and its northern neighbor creates an important new opportunity for a more constructive relationship and a more secure Balkan neighborhood. The Prespa Agreement, signed on the shores of Lake Prespa that straddles the two countries, is thus both the resolution of a dispute and the basis for a new beginning.

Hailed in foreign capitals as a major step forward for the region, it is important to recognize that the Prespa Agreement was not widely supported in either country and barely received the required parliamentary and popular votes needed in both Greece and its northern neighbor. The “Macedonian Question” represents a strategic, multi-dimensional controversy that has been on the European agenda since the 19th century: although now generally viewed as a problem largely

solved by the Prespa Agreement, there is no guarantee that the naming controversy will not fester in the region, ready to cause trouble in the future.

### Some Background

To understand the Macedonian “name” dispute, one need not go back to Philip of Macedon and Alexander the Great. Yet, we nearly always do, and perhaps it is helpful to start with the ancient kingdom.

Philip and his son Alexander established an empire on the northern part of the ancient Greek world of city states, modern day Greece and North Macedonia. After the death of his father, Alexander lost no time conquering and dominating the city states to the south. He went on to form an extraordinarily effective military machine that crossed into Asia Minor, conquered the Persian Empire, and extended its reach as far as Afghanistan, the edge of India, and Egypt. Although Alexander died young during his campaigns (323 BCE), and his unified empire was thereafter divided among his followers, the Macedonian leadership, Hellenic culture, and Greek language retained its dominance for centuries in much of the territory he had conquered.

The home base of the Macedonian empire was a part of this Hellenic world until conquered by the Romans in the 2nd century BCE. With the division of the Roman Empire in the 3rd century AD, this Macedonian region became part of the Byzantine Empire and later, in the 14th century, a territory within the Ottoman Empire. When the Ottoman Empire began to disintegrate in the 19th century, the famous “Macedonian Question” arose, first articulated in the 1880s: what would happen to the Macedonian region when the Ottomans were too weak to defend it?

There are two important takeaways from this history: First, Macedonia was never a stand-alone nation (at least since the death of Philip in 336 BCE). Rather, it was always a part of a much larger empire. As such, Macedonia is best thought more as an historic construct whose geographic borders are only vaguely defined. Second, the people who inhabited the Macedonian region changed over the centuries and were a mixture of different ethnicities: Greeks, Bulgarians, Macedonians (Makedonci), Albanians, Turks, Vlachs, Jews, and others. The French termed the phrase “*a salade de macédoine*,” what an American might call a Macedonian Melting Pot.

How would control over the region resolve itself once Ottoman rule ended? Certainly the issue would not be decided by the peoples of the region. To the contrary, the Macedonian Question was resolved fitfully and violently—over the course of the 20th century and the first decades of the 21st century—by actions taken by its near neighbors, the Great Powers of Europe, and the USA. I like to think of the Prespa Agreement as the last piece, hopefully, of the resolution of the Macedonian Question.

Geographically, the Macedonian Question was essentially resolved in the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913, critical conflicts in Balkan history barely noted in American or Western European historical narratives. Serbia from the north, Greece from the south, and Bulgaria from the east invaded the region sometimes known as “Turkey in Europe.” The Greek army was the most successful of the three, capturing the major city of Salonica (its name changed to Thessaloniki, as often is the case after a Balkan war). After the dust settled, Greece controlled about 52%, Serbia (later Yugoslavia) 38%, and Bulgaria 10% of the formerly Ottoman Macedonia (Albania obtained a sliver of the territory as well, and Turkey retained the territory known as Eastern Thrace).

The remainder of the 20th century continued to bring bad fortune to the Macedonian region. After the two Balkan Wars came World War I—seemingly without a break—during which the three parties fought once again over the region; grim interwar period followed; World War II saw renewed regional warfare and brutal occupations of Greece and the Macedonian part of Yugoslavia (successor to Serbia); the postwar period saw a continuation of hostilities, mostly as a result of the Greek Civil War, which, in northern Greece, was to a considerable extent an ethnic war of Slavic-speaking leftist partisans supported by the Soviet Comintern and Yugoslav strongman Josip Broz Tito fighting the western-backed Athens government.

Eventually, with the end of the Cold War came the bloody breakup of Yugoslavia. In 1991, the former “Macedonian” piece of Yugoslavia— consolidated since 1946 as the People’s (later Socialist) Republic of Macedonia within the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia—declared its independence. The people of this Yugoslav republic spoke the Macedonian language (*Makedonski*), were known as Macedonians (*Makedonci* in Macedonian), and by referendum adopted a constitution that named their new nation-state the Republic of Macedonia (*Republika Makedonija*). The next step for this very new, feisty Balkan country was admittance to the United Nations as one of the successor states to Yugoslavia, gaining broad international recognition. There was much rejoicing in the Republic of Macedonia about their independence; some statements by Macedonians implied that their new country had a historic role in the region that went beyond the geographic confines of their state and related to the greater Macedonian heritage of Ottoman and even ancient times. Although the government in Skopje was scrupulous in expressing its intentions in peaceful and constructive ways, in accord with international law, many Greeks inferred that there was a hidden irredentist, or at least confrontational, agenda by those who were gaining influence in Skopje.

In any case, Greece watched the process of nation building in its new northern neighbor with concern. It was one thing for Yugoslavia to have a “Macedonian” administrative unit within it. It was another thing for a new, independent nation-state to call itself “the Republic of Macedonia” when more than half of historic Macedonia was Greek. After all, northern Greece was widely called Macedonia (its administrative regions were technically called East, Central and West Macedonia). Moreover, the Greek people of northern Greece (who outnumbered the population of their new northern neighbor) referred to themselves as “Macedonians.” For Greek Macedonians, there was no “Macedonian language” other than Greek. And references in this new upstart country to the heritage of Philip and Alexander and a great ancient tradition seemed bizarre to Greeks when it came from Slavic-speaking people who hadn’t entered the region till the 6th century AD, some 800 years after the death of Alexander.

Their newly formed northern neighbor seemed, to the Greek leadership and the great majority of Greek people, a long-term threat to state security. Recall that although we in the West tend to think of Greece’s independence as taking place in 1821, the Greece of most of the 19th century was only a small Mediterranean, Aegean entity. Northern Greece was only incorporated into the Greek state during the 1912–1913 Balkan Wars, and there had been perceived risks of detachment of that part of Greece during the troubling decades that followed. Perhaps Greek strategic thinkers were over-sensitive, but perhaps we can forgive their excessive concern, if not some of the inflammatory rhetoric that accompanied it, in light of Balkan history. Greece believed it needed to prepare for the worst, including potential threats from northern peoples always seemingly pushing south and from Turkey to the east, which Greeks feared had not fully abandoned its desire to dominate, one way or another, its former European territories. An unstable new state on its northern border with possible aspirations to reunify historical Macedonia, perhaps not now but in the future and perhaps not alone but with powerful friends hostile to Greece, was new and disturbing.

Greece’s answer was to go to the United Nations Security Council and persuade its members that there was a threat to Greece’s security and to the security of the region by virtue, primarily, of the declared name of the newly independent state. In a major diplomatic success for Greece, the Security Council accepted that assessment, and in resolutions adopted in 1993, admitted the new state into membership in the United Nations with the provisional designation “the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.” Thus, the localized name dispute took on an international dimension and relegated this newest country to a complicated name, often disparagingly pronounced phonetically by its acronym “FYROM.” Secretary-General of the United Nations Boutros Boutros-Ghali was authorized to use his good offices to attempt a settlement. Former United States Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, already actively involved in matters relating to the former Yugoslavia, took the leading role as UN Special Envoy, and in 1994, for reasons best understood if considered through the prism of American internal politics, President Bill Clinton decided to appoint a US special envoy. I was privileged to take on that role.

A decision was made at that time (1994–1995) that a settlement of the “name” itself was not feasible. Instead, an interim agreement could be reached to resolve a number of related issues—important in and of themselves—and the “name” itself would more easily be solved in a relaxed atmosphere. The atmosphere in the region was tense. In Greece, under banners and slogans, such as “Macedonia is Greek,” nearly a million people had gathered in Thessaloniki to protest. Additionally, an embargo had been placed on the northern neighbor, which made it virtually impossible for traffic to move between the port city of Thessaloniki and the new state. Given the hostile situation throughout the rest of former Yugoslavia, including United Nations sanctions against Serbia and Montenegro, the newly independent landlocked Macedonian state struggled in multiple dimensions.

Fortunately, the new nation was headed by a skillful and highly respected leader, Kiro Gligorov. A leading Macedonian member of the ruling circle of Socialist Yugoslavia, but in fact a person who understood and largely shared the aroused national feelings of the people of the new state, Gligorov had a good sense of how far he could move his people and had successfully brought his state to independence and out of Yugoslavia, without hostilities. He was an able negotiator, as was Greek Prime Minister Andreas Papandreou. These two smart old-time politicians, sincere nationalists but men who understood that the situation was at the edge of disaster, recognized that a peaceful solution was needed. The Interim Agreement of September 1995 normalized relationships, ended the Greek economic measures that had closed the border, and changed the new flag adopted by the new state (it displayed a “star” which resembled the star on Philip’s tomb, the Star of Vergina as it is named), which in Greek eyes implied an appropriation of their distinctive heritage and a provocative irredentist symbol to some. The parties pledged peaceful relations and respect for established borders and agreed to avoid irredentist policies, appropriation of historic patrimony, and hostile actions. Finally, the Interim Agreement provided that the open issue relating to the name would be discussed by the parties under the aegis of the Secretary-General of the United Nations. In the meantime, “the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” would be used in the United Nations and by Athens, although not explicitly accepted by Skopje.

From time to time, the question is raised whether we were all too hasty in 1995 to conclude an interim agreement or whether instead the UN should have taken the risk to push for a full settlement, including choosing a definitive name. At my first meeting with Secretary Vance after my appointment, I asked whether the fundamental dispute over the name itself could be reopened, faced, and resolved. “Impossible now,” Vance replied, noting that he and Lord David Owen, EU co-chairman of the Conference for the Former Yugoslavia, had recommended “Nova Makedonija” as a definitive name but that both sides had turned it down. One can wonder, given the pressures on both sides, if we shouldn’t have taken another stab at it. We will never know. Vance’s conclusion was probably correct. It turned out to be difficult enough to get the Interim Agreement signed. Neither of the sides would meet with each other and an agreement was hammered out only after a final week-long push in New York in September 1995. Surprisingly, the Interim Agreement worked reasonably well as the basis of the relationship between Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia for some 24 years.

### The Negotiating Process

There were positive aspects to the process of trying to resolve the name dispute. First, there was a real process. Both sides accepted, and respected, the United Nations led effort, which involved the active involvement of successive Secretaries General, the appointment of his personal representative to the talks (Secretary Vance and later myself), appointment by both sides of high level diplomats as representatives to the talks, regular meetings, informal talks supplementing the formal meetings, and presentations by the mediator of written proposals from time to time—which were taken seriously, discussed, and, even when not accepted as a whole, formed a basis for future discussion and, indeed, the framework of the final agreement. Direct talks between the two

parties also took place from time to time. Noteworthy were a series of direct meetings between Prime Ministers Nikola Gruevski and George Papandreou—and occasional secret backchannel contacts were pursued, although they never led to significant results. During the 24 year period between the signing of the Interim Agreement and the final Prespa Agreement, there were periods when serious talks were not feasible. When Skopje was preoccupied with a serious confrontation between ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians around 2001, Greece plunged into its financial crisis beginning in 2010, there were elections looming in either country (and there were many), or governments in either or both of the countries were in disarray, one had to sit back and wait, maintaining informal talks with the representatives, being careful not to stoke the fires of nationalist rhetoric, especially during election periods.

Second, no hostilities were involved in this dispute, and relationships between Greeks and their northern neighbors were reasonably good on a person-to-person basis. Macedonians continued to travel in large numbers to the beaches of Greece during the summer; Greeks went north to shop and ski in their northern neighbor; and Greek businesses and banks were among the top investors in the new country. People on both sides looked forward to a day of open borders and friendlier relations. However, when individuals from the two sides met, they avoided talking about “Macedonia.” National positions were strongly held by ordinary people on both sides of the line; until the “name” dispute was resolved, the situation could not be normalized.

Third, the situation was helped by the constructive attitude of third parties. The international community wanted a solution, fearing instability or worse in the western Balkans. Diplomats from the USA, Germany, and the EU intervened in positive ways from time to time, as did other interested countries, including the United Kingdom, Austria, Slovenia, and the Nordic states. Third parties did not want to choose sides, but their encouragement of a solution, sometimes holding out incentives or asserting mild pressure, was important. Active involvement by the European Commission in promoting entry of the new state into the European Union, especially during the final years of negotiation when Commissioner Johannes Hahn played a positive role, was particularly important. Another constructive force promoting settlement was the substantial Albanian minority in the country; their political parties were united in wanting this issue resolved, and the Albanian leadership played an important role behind the scenes, encouraging sensible compromises. Although most third parties were supportive of a solution to the “name” dispute, toward the end of the negotiation there were rumblings from Moscow about Russia’s discomfort with the proposed settlement. Russia had good relations with both countries and no interest in the name itself, but a solution of the dispute meant that Greece would lift its effective veto of Skopje’s membership in NATO, and Russia was adamantly opposed to expansion of NATO in any way. Although there were reportedly Russian attempts in both countries to stir up domestic opposition to the agreement, in the end Russia accepted the decision of two Balkan states to solve their mutual problem, a sensible decision all round.

### A Question of Timing

On whose side is time? This question often asked in any negotiation, diplomatic or commercial. Should we make concessions now or wait? I discussed this frequently and separately with the parties over the nearly 25 years that I mediated these negotiations. Sometimes it seemed that the mediator was pushing for a solution harder than the parties themselves: this was not a good sign.

After the signing of the Interim Agreement in 1995, the strategy in Skopje was to consolidate its political and economic institutions, deal with inter-ethnic tensions, and foster broad international recognition of the new state. Their senior negotiator at the time, wise and experienced diplomat Ambassador Ivan Tosevski, laid out Skopje’s strategy to me in a personal conversation, one of many on the margins of our negotiating sessions or sitting in his home over glass of wine: “More and more countries appear to be accepting our constitutional name “Republic of Macedonia” for bilateral usage, nobody seems to take “Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” seriously, popular and

press references to our country as “Macedonia” are gaining steam, and Greek public opinion on the issue appears to be moderating.” In its representative’s opinion, time was clearly on Skopje’s side.

On the Greek side was a similar lack of urgency. Any compromise would be unpopular and, as explained to me by their negotiator, experienced senior diplomat Ambassador Adamantios Vassilakis, no Greek Government would make an agreement that was not supported by the leading opposition party, or it would lose the next election (as it turned out, he was right about that). An agreement acceptable to Greece would require the northern neighbor to change its name for both external and internal usage and to provide other assurances with respect to patrimony and irredentist aspirations. Given the Greek assessment of what was happening politically within their northern neighbor, no acceptable agreement seemed likely. Greece could afford to wait, the Greek negotiator believed, because it had the stronger position, being a member of the EU and NATO with veto powers in both organizations. Moreover, Greece had a stronger economy and closer relations with Washington and its EU co-members than the newly formed state to the north. In its representative’s opinion, time was clearly on Athens’ side.

The reality was different, certainly in my view. Because of the delay of more than two decades, Skopje lost its chance to join the EU along with, or just following, Croatia—not very long after the entry of two larger Balkan states, Bulgaria and Romania—and took the existential risk that the EU enlargement window would close. It seemed clear that Skopje would have to make a compromise on the name. So, I argued it would be better to take the medicine and get it over with and become a “normal” country as quickly as possible. To the Greeks it also would have been advantageous to quickly put this unpleasant dispute behind them: Greek security priorities were with Turkey; their economic priorities involved domestic reforms and greater integration into the EU; and achieving those objectives would be aided by resolving their differences with their small northern neighbor, who, in any case, could rapidly become a supportive friend to Greece with proper handling. These fears were in fact realized: the European Union of 2020 is in a profoundly different place with respect to enlargement generally, and the western Balkans specifically, than its expansive attitude that prevailed over 20 years ago. The important goal of EU membership for the Republic of North Macedonia is now an open question, even with full Greek support after the Prespa Agreement.

### Reframing the Question: The Principle of Loss Aversion

The Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman and his colleague Amos Tversky formulated the principle of loss aversion as an element of behavioral economics, but it is relevant to diplomatic (and other) negotiations as well. People generally, but elected leaders in particular, are more sensitive to losing something they already possess than they are to gaining something new. Consequently, all of us fight much harder to protect what we already have than to gain something additional. The “name” dispute is a good example of this phenomenon: a compromise solution could only result in a serious loss in the minds of both Athens and Skopje. To achieve a solution, the issue needed to be redefined and reframed. Positive elements needed to be included in the mix.

Let us consider the starting positions of both sides.

Viewed from Athens, Greece owned the name Macedonia. Northern Greece was Macedonia. Its inhabitants were Macedonians. Philip of Macedon and Alexander the Great were Hellenic heroes, and the legacy, patrimony, culture, and tradition of ancient Macedonia was Greek. They wished their northern neighbor well but pointed out that its citizens were Slavic in background with a totally different culture, a people who had entered the region eight centuries after the Macedonian identity had been established as part of the Hellenic world (the Albanian citizens of their northern neighbor were recognized as having ancient roots in the region, but Albanians were a distinct ethnicity and clearly not Macedonians). Just as important, Greeks viewed Macedonianism as a conceptual unity that could not be shared. If the northern neighbor was to gain recognition as “Macedonia” and its people as “Macedonians,” then the name and identity would be lost to the Greek side through what they perceived as wrongful appropriation by the northern neighbor.

Viewed from Skopje, the assessment was equally stark. They had lived in the Socialist Republic of Macedonia, a republic within Yugoslavia, since the end of the Second World War, and with independence they had logically and lawfully adopted the constitutional name Republic of Macedonia. How could they change their name? As a people, they identified themselves as Macedonians, as had their parents, grandparents, and previous generations. They had a unique language that they were proud of and a literary tradition, and that language was Macedonian, recognized broadly throughout the world as their language. All in all, Macedonianism was at the core of their identity. How could they give all that up? How could another country, with the name Greece and whose people were Greeks, tell them what to call themselves? As one young man said to me, “I wake up in the morning, and when I shave, I look in the mirror and say, “I’m a Macedonian.” What should I say tomorrow when they take away my identity?”

The strategy of the negotiation was to break down this stark difference in perception of what the dispute was about, identify which perceptions led to the dominance of loss aversion on both sides, and try to reframe the question. This reframing was only partially successful, and one must admit that in both countries the final agreement is still seen by large numbers of people primarily in terms of what was deemed to have been lost. However, the loss aversion, I believe, was substantially eroded during the period of negotiations, but it took 20 years of reframing efforts as well as the leadership of effective and committed political leaders on both sides.

We reframed the issue of the name as follows.

To Skopje we said:

“Let us talk about geography, not identity. In its resolutions, the UN Security Council was not trying to change the identity of your people. So, let’s relax about the fear that your Macedonian identity will be taken away. But the name of a state should reflect geographical reality. So, let’s all talk about geography. Macedonia is a geographic concept, and it is a large area. Can we agree on that? This large region was for centuries under Ottoman rule. And it was divided in 1912–1913 in the Balkan Wars,” agreed to by Skopje. “And you must admit that while your territory is a part of that Macedonian region, it is only a part. So, let’s be accurate about that: it is a small part, about 38%,” a fact grudgingly conceded by Skopje. “Thus, it’s not so far-fetched to introduce a modifier to your name to more accurately reflect the geographic reality. Consider maintaining your name Republic of Macedonia but adding a dignified modifier.”<sup>1</sup>

To Athens we said:

“Let us talk about geography, not identity. No one is trying to take your Macedonian identity away from you. We all know that Philip and Alexander were part of the Hellenic world and the Macedonian patrimony is Hellenic. All the world knows that. So, let’s relax about the fear that your identity will be taken away. And your people who live in northern Greece call themselves Macedonians (Greek *Makedones*). Fine—that will never change. The people of your northern neighbor call themselves *Makedonski*, something very different. It is only a peculiarity of the English language as well as a few others that *Makedones* and *Makedonski* are both translated “Macedonians.”<sup>2</sup> Let’s talk about geography. We all agree that Macedonia is a geographic concept and that the Ottoman Macedonian region was divided in 1912–1913. Greece won the largest part by far, but you need to concede it was only about half of that territory,” which they grudgingly conceded. “And your northern neighbor was geographically a part of that division of the Ottoman Macedonian territory,” which they again grudgingly conceded. “So assuming we can agree that the name Republic of Macedonia is too expansive to be appropriate from a geographic point of view, can’t we consider introducing a geographic modifier that clarifies the geographic separation between Greek Macedonia and your northern neighbor?”

A breakthrough occurred in the late 2000s when Athens reluctantly accepted the idea that a name that included “Macedonia” would be acceptable so long as it also included an acceptable geographic modifier. When Prime Minister Zoran Zaev in 2017 indicated that something like that might also be acceptable to Skopje—given resolution of all other issues, including protection of the identity of the Macedonian people—the basis of an agreement began to take shape.

In my set of suggestions to the parties of January 17, 2018 that initiated the final and successful rounds of the negotiations, the parties were urged to consider five names: North Macedonia, Upper Macedonia, Macedonia-Skopje, Vardar Macedonia (the Vardar River runs through the country), and Nova Macedonia (suggested by Vance in 1993 and reject by both sides at the time). “Other names might work too, but let’s focus our efforts on these five,” we urged. Each one had a problem, of course, and had to be assessed in the Macedonian language (*Severna Makedonija* for North, *Gorna Makedonija* for Upper, etc.) and for acceptability by Athens. Five possibilities turned out to be a good number to get people thinking of better or worse alternatives. In the process, people started getting used to these names. Focus groups were organized; the names were debated in the press and, of course, by political leaders. Athens was negative toward Macedonia-Skopje, thinking (probably correctly) that people would tend to drop the Skopje suffix. Skopje was negative toward Nova Macedonia for various reasons, partly because the idea of “New” Macedonia implied that they were newcomers to the region and thus had a less legitimate connection to the landscape. Eventually Skopje opted for Republic of North Macedonia in the final days leading up to Prespa.

Along with agreement on the name itself came the issue of the scope of its usage. As mediator, I had suggested over many years that any new name should be used internationally and that the constitutional name Republic of Macedonia continue to be used internally. Many nations have such a dual name system: Finland/Suomi, Ireland/Eire, Albania/Shqipëria; indeed, Greece itself uses Greece internationally but Hellas (or Ellas) internally (and sometimes Hellenic Republic, a third name). The dual name system would have advantages in terms of public acceptability in the northern neighbor, and also would probably not require a constitutional amendment, a difficult process. The Greeks were adamant, however, that the name needed to be applied *erga omnes*, one name for all purposes. I slowly came to agree for three reasons: first, the Greeks would not move on their insistence on *erga omnes*; second, having two names would lead to years of bickering about whether an application was domestic or international; third, given the aspiration of Skopje to join the European Union, it was obvious that within the EU there is no real distinction between what is domestic and what applies throughout the EU (e.g., drivers licenses, medical records, and academic diplomas, all domestic but also accepted across borders). This was a tough concession for Skopje, but it finally acquiesced to the *erga omnes* application of the new name, which required extensive constitutional changes that almost killed approval of the Prespa Agreement during the ratification process.

Skopje conceded on a modifier to Macedonia, effectively accepting a different name from the one in its constitution, and applied *erga omnes* internally and externally. What did it get in return? For one thing, Athens agreed to withdraw its effective veto on Skopje’s applications to join the European Union and NATO and actively supported its entry. Perhaps even more important as an objective of Skopje’s negotiators was global acceptance of the identity of its people, and this meant that there should be no question anywhere—including by their southern neighbor—that they were Macedonians and that their language was Macedonian. Skopje obtained satisfaction on this critical issue, but solving it involved adopting an intensely negotiated agreement on precise forms of usage and agreements on grammatical forms in the English language (which, of course, would carry over into other languages). At times, the mediator became, in effect, the grammarian-in-chief, rendering his considered opinion on various grammatical alternatives (e.g., attempting to explain the difference in English usage between “North” and “Northern”).

Finally, the parties agreed that for official organs of the state the adjectival reference in all official contexts would be “of the Republic of North Macedonia” (not “Macedonian” and not “North Macedonian”) (Prespa Agreement 2018, Article 1.3[f]). For official purposes, Greek negotiators

were willing to say: “He is the Prime Minister of North Macedonia”; they were unwilling to accept “He is the Macedonian Prime Minister”; and Skopje was unwilling to accept “He is the North Macedonian Prime Minister”; and so on. Though an occasionally awkward formulation, it solved a problem. And it should be remembered that this usage applies solely to official usage; what people use in unofficial contexts is a matter of ordinary use of language

But importantly, the Prespa Agreement embodies a different formulation when the adjectival form is applied to the nationality of the people of the new state. The agreed formulation for nationality would be “Macedonian/citizen of the Republic of North Macedonia” (Prespa Agreement 2018, Article 1.3[b]). And the official language of the new state, it was agreed, would be the “Macedonian language” (Prespa Agreement 2018, Article 1.3[c]). This agreement thus locked in the Macedonian identity for the people of the new Republic of North Macedonia, and Skopje’s leaders could confidently assure their people that they had been recognized as “Macedonians,” that they won their major objective in the negotiations, namely, recognition of their national identity.

The agreement contains a critical and unique provision—Article 7—that puts all this in historical context. It notes that when the terms “Macedonia” and “Macedonian” are used, they refer to different contexts (Prespa Agreement 2018, Article 7.1). Article 7 describes the Macedonian language as “within the group of South Slavic languages” and asserts that this language and other attributes of North Macedonia are “not related to the ancient Hellenic civilization, history, culture, and heritage of the northern region of [Greece]” (Prespa Agreement 2018, Article 7.4). By including in the Prespa Agreement these explicit statements as to historical attributes, the two parties definitively articulated and solemnly accepted their different usages of “Macedonian” and set the stage for a future of mutual respect for their differences.<sup>3</sup>

The negotiation of the Prespa Agreement was in the able hands of two brilliant Foreign Ministers (their representatives to the talks, after doing useful work over a long period, were replaced in the final negotiations by the two Foreign Ministers). Foreign Minister Nikos Kotzias, a Greek academic by background, had a long-term vision that Greece should be playing a more important role in southeast Europe. Resolving the name dispute with Greece’s northern neighbor—along with resolving some open issues with Albania—was an essential step in positioning Greece for that role. Thus, it was high on his agenda. He personally drafted many of the provisions of the agreement and articulated the Greek position with passion. Foreign Minister Nikola Dimitrov knew the name issue well, having been the representative to our earlier talks. A serious, steady, and unflappable negotiator, he had a deep love for the Macedonian heritage and traditions, and he was determined to move his country into the Euro-Atlantic world. Both diplomats achieved their most important objectives and moved the negotiations to focus on what could be won and not on what was seemingly given up; loss aversion was avoided for the most part.

But ultimate credit goes to the two Prime Ministers. For their own reasons and each in their own way, they determined that the time had come to resolve this dispute and that they would put their political credibility on the line to achieve this result. Both Prime Ministers were young (44-years-old on the day of signing the agreement) and represented a new generation in the Balkans. Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras had gone through years of difficulties dealing with Greece’s financial/economic crisis and was determined to solve one of his country’s major regional problems. He succeeded and, notwithstanding his defeat in the subsequent election, demonstrated that he was a European statesman of the highest order. And Prime Minister Zoran Zaev, a relatively new political leader of his small country with little international experience, proved time and time again that he understood the issues, how far he would go, and how he would maximize his country’s position. The personal rapport developed by the two Prime Ministers permitted issues to go to them directly in several situations when negotiations seemed at a standstill.

The work of the two Prime Ministers in making ultimate judgments during the negotiations was not their final contribution to the process. The ratification process in both countries was difficult. Opposition was intense. The entire population of each country was engaged, and overall one has to give credit to the democratic processes and traditions that have taken hold in both Greece and its

new northern neighbor. In what is now North Macedonia, important constitutional changes were required, involving popular referenda and supermajority votes of Parliament. The success that was achieved in both countries, it should be acknowledged, was only possible because of effective political leadership and mobilization of support. In the opinion of many, these two young Balkan leaders set an example of long-term vision, difficult decision making under pressure, and courageous political leadership that not many global leaders seem able to achieve in our times.

## Conclusion

I should note the Prespa Agreement has many forward looking provisions: for example, transition arrangements for the change of name; support by Greece of North Macedonia's admission process to NATO; the opening of the EU accession negotiations process; areas of cooperation between the two neighbors in economic, cultural, educational, political and security matters; methodology for dealing with questions of disputed cultural patrimony; and so on. In every respect, the Prespa Agreement is a work in progress. Whether it is a success or not, whether Greece and North Macedonia have truly resolved their differences, and whether the Macedonian Question of the 1880s has finally been resolved will be for future generations to determine.

**Disclosure.** Author has nothing to disclose.

## Notes

- 1 My first try was Republic of Macedonia (Skopje) or Republic of Macedonia-Skopje, disappointingly rejected by Skopje at a time when Athens might have considered it.
- 2 I once made the point that the whole name dispute was actually a dispute about the English language but was roundly criticized for that comment.
- 3 An example I used with the parties to assist in working out these formulations was "Georgia." Both the country of Georgia the nation in the Caucasus, and Georgia the state in the southern United States, have the same name and adjective. If one says, "I'm from Georgia" or "I'm a Georgian," it is unclear whether one is from Tbilisi or from Atlanta; context is required. Similarly, I argued about "Macedonian." We can use the same English word (in their own languages of course the words are different: *Makedonas* in Greek and *Makedonski* in Macedonian) but at the same time explain the differing contexts. The Greek negotiator countered: "Very nice, Ambassador, but the two Georgias are in different continents and in any case didn't fight each other in the Balkan Wars." However, the example was at least helpful to the mediator.

## Reference

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**Cite this article:** Nimetz, M. 2020. The Macedonian "Name" Dispute: The Macedonian Question—Resolved?. *Nationalities Papers* 48: 205–214, doi:10.1017/nps.2020.10