

What's In a Name? Macedonia and the Political Implications of its Name Change

Dimitris Christopoulos

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Dimitris Christopoulos is a professor of state and legal theory at The Panteion University of Athens, and he is the President of the International Federation of Human rights. His scholarship focuses on issues related to human rights, the far right, minorities, migrants and citizenship. Among his recent publications are *The Deep State and the Extreme Right in Contemporary Greece*, and *Questioning citizenship: Political Discourse, Norms and History in Comparative Perspectives*.

The following are five questions posed by *The World Orders Forum* to professor Chistopoulos relating to the Macedonia topic.

1) Why has changing the official name of Macedonia been so controversial in Greece?

I'd say for three reasons: the first one is that, throughout the 20th century, the Greek State had done what it could in order to erase the linguistic Macedonian identity from its territory by exercising policies of forced assimilation. At the moment that it seemed that the objective of forced assimilation had been achieved, the dissolution of Yugoslavia exploded like a bomb next to the Greek borders. Not only was a Macedonian identity officially recognized, but an independent country with the name "Republic of Macedonia" was present. That was conceived of as a threat. From a distance, it might seem irrational but, in the heat of the moment, nobody cared in Greece about the right of a people for self-determination. The use of the name "Macedonia" was regarded as a threat.

The second reason is that half of the territory of the once Ottoman Macedonia had been awarded to Greece in 1913 via the terms of the Bucharest Treaty. The Greek inhabitants of these territories identify themselves as "Greek Macedonians" and the fact that there are people identifying themselves as ethnic Macedonians creates a cultural uncertainty which motivates political authoritarianism. A major question for these Greeks is "If they are Macedonians, then what are we?"

The third reason why the name issue has been so controversial in Greece is the fear that the neighbors would legitimize their Macedonian identity by appropriating from the Greeks the ancient, glorious Macedonian heritage of which Greek nationalism is very proud. The more "Alexanders" were constructed as monuments in Skopje, the more Greeks believed that their

identity had been stolen. And vice versa, the more Greeks denied their neighbors' identity, the more our neighbors would turn back to the ancient Macedonian glory to support their wounded pride.

2) What is it that has allowed for the name change to be agreed to in both FYROM (the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) and Greece?

Two factors. One internal for both countries, and one external.

The internal factor was the government change in Skopje with the defeat of the Macedonian nationalist VMRO. To a lesser extent, this goes also for Athens. Although negotiations between Athens and Skopje were taking place among previous governments, for a left-wing government like SYRIZA, finding a compromise solution for the “name issue” had been a priority. The Greek left - although far from being entirely emancipated from nationalist discourse – was in an incomparably better position to negotiate the name issue than the Greek conservative party, which is a victim of its own extreme rightists. The internal political cost for such an Agreement has been proven unbearable for the Greek establishment parties until today.

The external factor which functioned as a triggering event to find the solution now has been the will of the Macedonian Government to enter NATO and the pressure exercised by all western governments for a compromise solution. This pressure – particularly when the Macedonian Parliament was voting the constitutional reform – became extremely loud and inappropriate. It therefore, risked to have inverse results.

3) Is it expected that this name change will facilitate North Macedonia's entry into NATO and the EU? And if so, why and how?

The Prespa Agreement provides that should the country change its name to North Macedonia, as it did, then the Greek government ratifies the accession protocol of North Macedonia to NATO. Today, this is a done deal. The EU accession process is far more complicated and it is not regulated by the Prespa Agreement. Greece is obliged to facilitate this process, but nothing prevents Greece or any other EU member state from raising issues during this long pre-accession period, regarding compliance with the accession criteria and implementation of the European acquis by North Macedonia. My view is that accession to the EU will be a long and painful path for North Macedonia with obstacles completely irrelevant to the name issue.

4) Is Greece in favor or opposed to North Macedonia joining NATO and the EU? Why or why not?

Traditionally Greece is in favor to every Balkan country joining the EU because this is considered as a guarantee for peace and security in the region. Despite traditional bilateral links with Russia, Greece is also in favor of North Macedonia joining NATO, and this is how the infamous “name issue” has been resolved.

5) Are these developments relating to Macedonia part of a larger trend in the Balkans, as states seek to move past historical grievances and enter a new phase of relations between themselves and with Europe more generally? Or should the Macedonia development be viewed as more of an isolated incident?

In 1993 Robert Kaplan published his best seller, *Balkan Ghosts*, with which he intended to convince us that the people of the Balkan peninsula form an unhappy, uncivilized whole and that the term “Balkans” since the late 19th century has stood for political chaos, marked by pervasive suffering, extreme nationalist passions and warfare.

A few years later, a Bulgarian professor in the US, Maria Todorova, wrote her very influential *Imagining the Balkans*, where she traces the relationship between the reality and this stereotypical, mythologized invention which is still being transmitted as discourse on the Balkans. She calls that “Balkanism”: a negative stereotype of the Balkans as the perfect European “other” which is innately irrational, passionate and violent, deeply unable to find “civilized” solutions to its problems. “Balkanism” is therefore a particular form of western racism, a stereotypical perception which is not able to historically contextualize the Balkans as a part of a common European heritage.

According to this prevailing “balkanist” stereotype, only sad news is to be expected from this region! Well, the Prespa Agreement is a solemn refutation of this! After all, should there be political will and some luck, excellent news can come from a “difficult” neighborhood the very moment that the whole of the Old Continent seems to sink in its historical sins of divisions and right wing populism. The Prespa Agreement is not a panacea. But it is a major step forward and with some benevolent prudence it won’t be remembered as an isolated incident. Prespa not only shows the path for the Balkans but for Europe itself.