

Future of Macedonia name dispute

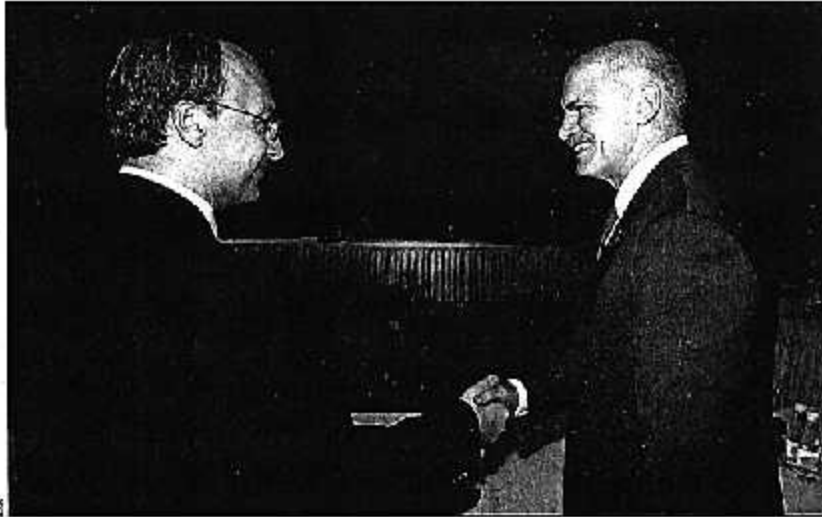
COMMENTARY

BY ARISTOTLE TZIAMPRIS*

Will the recent election landslide victory and comfortable parliamentary majority achieved by the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) facilitate the resolution of the ongoing Macedonia name dispute? George Papandreu's election was publicly welcomed by politicians in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), who indicated willingness to negotiate, and there is also a palpable feeling of renewed (if cautious) optimism by international decision-makers. At the same time, the almost two-decade-long diplomatic dispute is widely considered to have the potential to further destabilize the region of the Western Balkans.

An apparent convergence is under way among most actors involved in the negotiations toward an agreement that is welcomed by the international community as the "best" possible - but not necessarily historically just - outcome. It would most likely consist of a final and comprehensive accord between Greece and FYROM involving a compromise international compound name with a geographical connotation (e.g. "Northern Macedonia").

If an agreement along these lines is achieved, FYROM would automatically join NATO under the new name, its accession path toward the EU would accelerate and the concerns of the country's Albanian population (about a quarter of the population) assuaged in a manner conducive to regional stability. (Revealingly, 55 percent of FYROM's ethnic Albanians support a compromise on the name issue to facilitate NATO and EU membership, though 95 percent of Slav-Macedonians are opposed.)



Premier and Foreign Minister George Papandreu (l) shakes hands with FYROM Foreign Minister Antonio Miloski (r) at the opening of the Southeast European Cooperation Process in Istanbul on October 9.

Any such agreement would also have to address a series of legitimate Greek concerns, including the recent manifestations of Slav-Macedonian nationalism that have included the renaming of airports and highways, commission of giant statues, as well as other actions often indicating a fixation with Alexander the Great. It should furthermore be stressed that directly dealing with the controversial and "thorny" issues of FYROM's identity and language has the potential of derailing negotiations. Solving the name dispute outright would undoubtedly represent a major diplomatic accomplishment. However, an equally likely scenario involves the issue's non-resolution despite continuous diplomatic meetings and negotiations. As a top Slav-Macedonian politician, striking a note of realistic pessimism, recently

told this author, "Almost every conceivable settlement has already been proposed at some time or another but rejected by one of the two sides."

If this scenario prevails, FYROM's ruling party will probably continue the campaign to link Slav-Macedonian identity and history to antiquity. Furthermore, NATO and EU accession prospects will remain stalled. The country's ethnic Albanians would be particularly disappointed by such an outcome and it is not unrealistic to imagine that the Ohrid framework agreements (which ended the republic's 2001 ethnic strife) could be challenged. As US State Department officials warn, this could produce perilous regional implications. (FYROM borders on Kosovo and, during periods of crisis, the influx of refugees, armed ethnic Albanian

guerrilla fighting and illicit activities have linked the two places.)

If a comprehensive agreement remains elusive and in order to avoid the dispute's complete non-resolution, certain experts have begun examining a third "interim" scenario. This is based on the realization that the only substantive agreement that has been reached between FYROM and Greece was the 1995 New York Interim Accord that normalized bilateral relations but (significantly) did not resolve the name dispute. (However, Athens did recognize the young republic and Skopje changed the country's flag, which had featured the ancient Macedonian "Star of Vergina" symbol.)

According to this interim scenario, FYROM would enter NATO under its provisional UN name, after having addressed all the recent actions

deemed provocative by Greece (renaming airports and highways once again, dropping the case against Greece in the International Court of Justice at The Hague etc.) thus proving in practice good-nigh-early relations. The signing of a Treaty of Friendship could further codify the types of actions that would be unacceptable in the future.

Nevertheless, since there can be no firm guarantee that Skopje would not revert to nationalist or other provocations (whereas NATO membership, once achieved, is effectively irreversible), Athens could publicly link any new national status to a democratic referendum on the neighboring republic's EU accession, with rather predictable results. (It should be noted that for FYROM, EU membership is ultimately even more significant than NATO membership.) Negotiations on the resolution of the name dispute would, of course, continue to be conducted, possibly within an improved bilateral climate.

If this scenario is realized, regional stability might be enhanced. However, the resolution of the name dispute will be pushed even further into the future, while Athens will have lost an important source of diplomatic leverage.

At this point, it is not clear which outcome will prevail. What is certain is that considerable statesmanship and diplomatic skills will have to be exhibited in order to resolve an urgent and important diplomatic problem that influences the domestic politics in both Greece and FYROM and has very real consequences for the Western Balkans.

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