

# FYROM and the name dispute

COMMENTARY  
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**A**s the recent Greek election campaign properly demonstrated, the Macedonian name dispute continues to have the ability to produce headlines and affect voters. Much abused in the past by partisan strategies and personal agendas, it is imperative to take an objective look at the parameters surrounding the issue today based on a realistic assessment of what is feasible. This article will not dwell on the historical and cultural aspects of the dispute (others have done so remarkably well, publishing – in this author's assessment – very strong arguments in support of various Greek positions). Rather, we will concentrate on the contemporary political and international realities that will determine the possibility for a final resolution of the name issue.

Diplomats and decision makers striving toward achieving such a goal should keep in mind the following:

1. There is no possibility that a Greek government will willingly acquiesce to the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) being given a name for international use that is identical to the young republic's constitutional name. To do so would be to ignore legitimate popular sensitivities and concerns, thus courting serious electoral punishment. Furthermore, politicians are understandably loath to officially endorse with their signature their country's international humiliation. A compromise is perhaps feasible but not on the basis of an agreement that would be tantamount to the capitulation of the Greek side.

2. On April 13, 1992, the Council of Presidency Leaders in Athens endorsed a position (with the exception of the Greek Communist Party) according to which FYROM is not to be recognized if the term Macedonia is included in its name. This position appears to have been tacitly updated by various Greek governments. For example, the Simitis administration reportedly pursued a decision on the name "Comaraleonia" (meaning Upper Macedonia). Also, the previous Costas Karamanlis administration, by accepting as a basis for negotiations the Test (March 2005) proposal by United Nations Special Envoy Matthew Nimetz (suggested name: "Republika Makedonija-Skopje"), communicated that it will



Workers fix a road sign bearing the new name of Skopje's international airport - 'Alexander the Great' - in three languages. The choice of name caused outrage in Athens.

not necessarily be bound by the April 1992 decision. In other words, it is very probable that any final agreement on the name dispute will be based on a climb-down from Athens's stricter and popular position of the past. The attitude, however, has not been reciprocated by successive governments in Skopje that have been unwilling to discuss a meaningful compromise on the name issue, steadfastly sticking to a dual name formula according to which the constitutional name should be the same as its constitutional one, Greece alone being allowed to choose another name with Skopje's consent.

3. The popular resonance of the Macedonian name dispute in Greece should not be underestimated. Even if long periods of relative calm and silence are observed, it still has the potential to flare up again and elicit strong reactions, particularly in Greek Macedonia. The election to Parliament of the right-wing party PASD and New Democracy's slim majority (152 MPs out of 300) diminishes the government's room for diplomatic maneuver and moves (but does not necessarily negate) the political space for an agreement.

4. Even for agreement to be reached soon, it would be unfair to judge it politically or otherwise, in

isolation. There is a long list of failed diplomatic initiatives spanning some 16 years (the Imbetro package, the O'Neill report, the Vance-Owen plan, the Interim Accord that was inconclusive on the name issue, Nimetz's two different drafts of proposals in 2005). Their careful examination allows certain observations to be made. The tendency has usually been for each successive proposal to be less apprehensive and supportive of Greece's positions. Furthermore, the most recent (and the effort Nimetz's second in September 2005) was the worse for Greece. In addition, some 124 countries have recognized FYROM with its constitutional name for use in the bilateral relations, Canada being the latest, and if mediation of the UN level terminates peacefully, the consequences might prove especially negative for Athens. The conclusion is thus inescapable: Time has not been on Greece's side on the issue of the name dispute.

5. The recent renaming of Skopje and Ochrid airports ("Alexander the Great" and "Saint Paul" respectively) constitute an unwarranted provocation, probably indicative of a certain degree of arrogance. These are not acts conducive to a resolution of the dispute.

6. The continuation of FYROM's existence and territorial integrity is in Greece's best interest,

not least because the neighboring republic has the potential of operating as an important buffer state. At the same time, it should be noted that since the signing of the Interim Accord, the normalized and now excellent economic bilateral relations have not been deemed sufficient to solve the name dispute, although it is by no means pondering what the situation between Skopje and Athens would have been without such an improvement.

7. Greece's ultimate interest in the Balkans requires regional stability and prosperity. This is why Athens supports the Euro-Atlantic prospects of all the Western Balkan states. Given that FYROM's NATO membership is likely to be decided in a few months, a certain urgency and potentially huge complication is now added to the name issue.

8. FYROM's entry into NATO with its provisional name is permissible under the terms of the relevant article of the Interim Accord. This is the formula that allowed FYROM to become a European Union candidate state, and may also resolve the issue of its NATO membership. However, it is increasingly becoming less politically feasible and clear that Athens will sign up to such an outcome, especially when it can be argued that Skopje is violating other articles of the accord. The specter of an impasse and of a Greek veto on the alliance's enlargement, or a somewhat problematic time for NATO, can thus not be entirely precluded. Given all of the above, a possible way out would involve a third (and possibly final) proposal submitted by Matthew Nimetz at the United Nations level, acceptable to both sides and addressing not only the name issue, but also educational, cultural and economic aspects of the dispute. A genuine bilateral willingness for an agreement would be required, as would international (and especially US) pressure on Skopje.

Time is running out and we are perhaps looking at the last chance for an internationally mediated resolution of the Macedonian name dispute. Given that all previous ones have failed, a certain only somewhat guardedly optimistic

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