

# FYROM turns to nationalism

COMMENTARY  
By ARISTOTLE TZIANGIROS

The recent letter that the prime minister of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), Nikola Gruevski, sent to Greece's Prime Minister Costas Karamanlis constitutes a turning point and a seriously negative development in the 17-year diplomatic history of the Macedonian name dispute.

First, Gruevski alleges that thousands of his compatriots left Greece after the conclusion of the 1946-49 Greek Civil War and demands that they and their descendants be allowed to return, be given dual citizenship (by which he means also Greek), and furthermore have their property returned. He then goes on to demand the official recognition of a "Macedonian minority" residing in Greece today that should subsequently be provided with educational, linguistic and other rights. This is an historically seipitive and dubious formulation based on nationalistic sentiments that is bound to produce unhelpful diplomatic consequences. Of course, letters written by politicians aiming primarily at domestic partisan gains can afford to ignore complex, dramatic historical realities, as well as inconvenient facts. For example, they can discard the existence of domestic and international legal processes that address property issues; they can opt not to discuss the role and actions of various organizations during the Nazi occupation and Civil War and they can choose to ignore the not unbulking measures pursued by [Macedonian] Tito that focused on linguistic, historical and even nationalist constructs.

Politicians like Gruevski can also pretend not to be familiar with the electoral fortunes of the Greek Rainbow Party that espoused positions similar to FYROM's leader. During the 1990s, the Rainbow Party contested a series of local and federal elections, aiming primarily to exert pressure in order to secure rights for what it claimed to be a Slavophone minority. It participated in the June 1994 elections for the European Par-



FYROM Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski is seen here in a file photo. In a letter sent to him recently, Greek PM Costas Karamanlis said, "Any allegations regarding the existence of such a minority are totally unfounded."

liament, gaining 7,263 votes in the entire country. These votes represented just 0.1 percent of the total.

In the 1996 general election, it fielded common candidates with a party called the Organization for the Reconstruction of the Greek Communist Party (OAKKE) and received 13,485 votes (0.05 percent of the total). In the June 1999 elections for the European Parliament, both the Rainbow Party and OAKKE were represented, gaining 4,885 (0.076 percent of the total) and 4,522 (0.072 percent) votes respectively. (In the April 2003 general elections, only OAKKE candidates stood for office, securing 1,122 votes and 0.02 percent.) These election results for the Rainbow Party can only be judged as disappointing though not necessarily surprising, given the apparent absence of the minority that it claimed to represent.

Nikola Gruevski ought to know that no Greek government will ever recognize a non-existent minority. Perhaps he reckons that by sending his July 10 letter he will succeed in pressuring

the Karamanlis administration. The truth of the matter is that his action will indeed produce a series of diplomatic consequences, though probably not the ones that he may have had in mind.

More specifically, the international community is now fully alert to the fact that Athens is dealing with an almost hostile government that is more interested in provoking Greece than resolving the Macedonian name dispute.

The list of provocations is long and constantly growing: the renaming of the Skopje and Ohrid airports as Alexander the Great and St. Paul, the Apostle, respectively; confrontational statements at the UN General Assembly, the mocking of Greece in a series of published interviews by government officials; the placement of the Greek flag with the Nazi swastika on huge billboards placed around Skopje; FYROM's president laying a wreath at a monument where a map of Greater Macedonia which included a big part of Greece had also been placed; public irredentist statements by religious leaders and,

now, Nikola Gruevski's letter.

It is worth noting that FYROM's nationalistic turn coincided with the official diplomatic hardening in Greece's position on the name issue, which accepted the term Macedonia as part of a compound name with a geographical connotation. This compromise position was rather appreciated and not repudiated by the government in Skopje, and it will be interesting to see whether Greece's stance will alter as a result in the near future. After winning a landslide electoral victory (and an absolute majority in parliament) on an extreme nationalist platform, Gruevski might have just not enough credibility to pursue a "Nixon in China" type of approach and clinch an agreement on the name dispute. Unfortunately, he seems to have chosen the slippery road of nationalism. Foreign Minister Demetris Bakoyannis correctly predicted that such an attitude will "reach whirling winds."

Gruevski's letter ensures that FYROM will not be joining NATO anytime soon. Provoking Greece has proved

more attractive than pursuing good neighborly relations or achieving the projected stability that EU membership would guarantee.

Furthermore, Greece is now bound to block FYROM from getting a starting date for its European Union accession negotiations. This will be easier for Athens to pursue given President Nicolas Sarkozy's support on the name issue and the fact that France will be holding the Union's presidency during the relevant discussions. Finally, the most recent international phase of name and diplomatic negotiations under UN auspices is, at least for the time being, effectively dead. Nikola Gruevski has opted to revisit and fight battles of the past. If he continues down this path, he is bound to lose the future for his country.

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