

GREECE AND “MACEDONIA”

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Ever since the dissolution of Yugoslavia, Greece has been entangled in the so-called “name issue” a.k.a the “Macedonian issue” a.k.a. the “Skopjan issue.” This “issue” revolves around the constitutional name of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia; in a unilateral move, the “Skopjans” declared their independent state “Republic of Macedonia” as soon as Tito’s construct disintegrated in 1991. Greece took offense over this purely Greek name being “highjacked” by the former next-door communists – and, following that, the Balkans were never the same.

The new year 2018 appeared to energize a significant prospect of both Athens and Skopje moving to find a compromise solution. The fall of a nationalist administration in Skopje, and the presence of a leftist government in Athens, seemed to promise starting negotiations in a positive climate. Both sides made early statement vowing to “work together” in reaching a mutually acceptable agreement.

But, Balkans being Balkans, this modest hope appears flickering and almost extinguished. In Skopje, Prime Minister Zoran Zaev struggles with the remnants of

the previous administration that include current negotiator Naumovski, who hastened [to announce](#) he is not prepared to compromise with Greece or the UN, for that matter.

“Skopjan” hardliners demand withdrawal from the UN-sponsored talks seconded by militant diaspora organizations. The militants fear that if a compromise is reached their “Macedonian” ethnic identity and language would become obsolete leaving the “Skopjans” orphans in a threatening world.

In Athens, PM Tsipras faces resistance inside his own SYRIZA party, not to mention the [refusal](#) of the powerful Church of Greece to “surrender” the name “Macedonia” to the “Skopjans.”

Popular opposition has also burgeoned quickly. On January 21, a major protest rally in Greece’s second largest city, Thessaloniki, capital of the Greek province of Macedonia, mobilized 90,000 (according to the police) or 500,000 (according to its organizers). The rally’s tone was combative and nationalistic; “pro-Skopjan” politicians, like Thessaloniki’s mayor Boutaris, were prominent by their absence. Similarly, Greek Macedonian diaspora organizations fan the fires of rejecting any compromise whatsoever with Skopje. Polls, meantime, show a commanding majority of Greeks [rejects](#) the use of “Macedonia” in *any* solution.

Is there a realistic way out of this conundrum? Unfortunately, the answer – any answer – at this moment in time is pessimistic.

Greece, by all estimates, has a procedural upper hand in the dispute. It has successfully blocked Skopje’s accession to NATO and any negotiations with the EU on potential membership of the bloc. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, in an address to the FYR Macedonia parliament, [announced](#) that

“There is no other way to join NATO until an acceptable solution on the name is found.”

But, at the same time, Athens can ill afford to clash with an American demand of expanding NATO membership in the Balkans, although there are still [questions](#) about the Trump administration’s commitment to NATO’s Balkan future. And Greece’s powers of persuasion in Europe, never particularly strong, have been eroded to near extinction as the country wallows in the German-induced “bailout” and austerity quagmire and its actions are those of a state of limited sovereignty.

Skopje is in no better condition. Its problems though are “structural,” and thus more serious, because of the presence of a powerful “Macedonian” irredentist component that aspires to a “Greater Macedonia” and issues maps that include Thessaloniki in this imaginary nationalistic construct.

FYR Macedonia is also home to a substantial Albanian minority that has little to no interest in the “name issue.” The Albanians have repeatedly and bloodily clashed with the Slavomacedonians. More recently, FYR Macedonia’s president, Gjorge Ivanov, [vetoed](#) a bill making Albanian the second official language of the country triggering bitter protests from the Albanian side. The Slavomacedonians fear collusion between the “Macedonian” Albanians and Albania’s nationalists next door – and look apprehensively at the example of Kosovo so dear to “Macedonian” Albanians.

The role of Brussels in all of this is unclear. The EU is not known for its unified pro-active approach to foreign policy; its role in the disintegration of Yugoslavia isn’t forgotten in the Balkans and EU envoys, reaching out to Balkan leaders, are treated cautiously.

Those few in Athens and Skopje, who perceive the two neighbors as natural partners rather than perpetual disputants, find only unwilling audiences in both countries. In Greece, the Slavophones of northern Greece fighting on the side of the communists, during the latter's insurgency of 1946-49, isn't forgotten – and the passage of time hasn't been able to extinguish such memories; to the Greek state a "Macedonian minority" in Greece is nonexistent. Europeans and Americans though are baffled by these identity issues and, thus, fail to appreciate the true gulf separating Athens and Skopje.

Against this background, debates on "maximal" solutions continue: the ideal result in the eyes of the overwhelming majority of Greeks would be a next-door "Macedonia" with a completely different name—no "Macedonia" accepted. On the other hand, the ideal solution for the "Skopjans," those, in other words, who identify themselves as (Slav) "Macedonians," the name "Macedonia" is non-negotiable since it secures their existence as a separate distinct people (and not, for example, as extensions of Bulgaria).

At the end of the day, none of the proposals on the table are acceptable against the background of the 25-year long dispute. What remains to be seen is whether a determined US intervention can break the logjam and "facilitate" (read: impose) a *political agreement* which, in the longer run, will benefit both sides and stabilize one of the most insecure parts of the Balkans.