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Goodbye FYROM, Welcome North Macedonia
Solving the Name Dispute with Greece and the Way Forward

Summary

The implementation of the Prespa Agreement was the successful endpoint in the process of solving a decades-old dispute between Greece and North Macedonia on the latter's official name. Greece had long shown an uncompromising stance on its neighbour using the same name as its northernmost province. As a result Athens blocked the country's accession to EU and NATO.

In North Macedonia, a decade of democratic backsliding and nationalist rhetoric and policies under consecutive Gruevski cabinets left no perspective for a solution of the dispute. However, as the 2015-2017 crisis in North Macedonia set the low-point in this development, the change of government in Skopje finally offered a fresh start to address the issue.

The article gives an overview of the process towards the Prespa Agreement's negotiation and implementation. It also offers an outlook on the possible developments after North Macedonia appears to be back on track in the process of Euro-Atlantic integration. Overall, there are many reasons to be optimistic about the current developments. But several problems inside and challenges outside of North Macedonia remain that can make the next steps more difficult.

Goodbye FYROM, Welcome North Macedonia

Solving the Name Dispute with Greece and the Way Forward

■ Introduction

Almost three decades after its independence from Yugoslavia, the notorious acronym of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) has finally been scrapped and replaced by a new name, the Republic of North Macedonia.¹ This name will now be used in all contexts (*erga omnes*), and allows Greece to unblock the country's accession process to the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The Prespa Agreement of 12 June 2018 between the two countries thus set an end point to a conflict lasting over twenty years that many observers had long regarded as unsolvable.

Despite of its historical significance, the name deal between Greece and North Macedonia hardly received the attention it deserved in the (German) media and was rarely explained in its relevance beyond the region. It is thus crucial to outline at the beginning of this article the dimension of the Prespa Agreement and its implementation: *First*, it is an example of goodwill and constructive engagement of two countries' governments who decided to abandon the current trend of fragmented national responses in international politics. Despite of a tradition to politicize the name issue in both countries, and a history of governments thriving on populist accusations against the other side, both Prime Ministers – Zoran Zaev and Alexis Tsipras – decided not to take this path, even when facing low domestic approval ratings.

Second, the name deal is also an example of successful multilateral efforts, as negotiations took place under the auspices of the United Nations (UN) process and

1 The use of the terms North Macedonia and 'Macedonian' in this article are based on the name guide offered by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of North Macedonia and thereby apply the standards set in the Prespa Agreement with Greece. The name North Macedonia is always used in this article when referring to the successor state of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia. In German, the correct and only notation is 'Nordmazedonien'. See *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of North Macedonia*, available at http://mfa.gov.mk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2976:q-a-on-prespa-agreement&catid=52&Itemid=684&lang=en (accessed 27 February 2019).

were supported by the EU as well as the United States (USA). It thus shows that Europe and America can still collaborate fruitfully and support processes of regional stabilization. Furthermore, it also underlines that diplomacy and careful negotiations are still the way to go for effective processes in international relations and will unlikely be replaced by 'show events' of leaders' meetings ending without any tangible results. *Third* and finally, especially the effort in North Macedonia highlights that despite of their internal depression, EU and NATO still attract outsiders to go great lengths to achieve membership. This is a hopeful sign in a period that likes to stress the EU's kowtow to 'Stabilitocracy' in the Western Balkans, and experiences discord among member states and political camps at an unprecedented scale.

However, beyond the historic dimension and its exemplary character, there are still many questions open when it comes to the process of name change, the political cost paid to achieve it, as well as the durability of the solution in all dimensions of the conflict. This article therefore aims to shed some light on the continued difficulties looming for the name deal and the future path of North Macedonia. It proceeds as follows: The first paragraph offers crucial background information on the conflict between Greece and North Macedonia, and the more recent developments during the state crisis in North Macedonia. Then, the process of negotiations is traced as well as the arduous road towards the implementation of the Prespa Agreement in both countries. The article closes with an outlook on the most important remaining pitfalls for the name deal and especially the Euro-Atlantic integration process of North Macedonia.

Background: The Name Dispute with Greece and the Crisis in North Macedonia

Since independence, the constitutional name of the later Republic of North Macedonia had been contested. Macedonians had for the first time in their history achieved independent statehood by splitting from Yugoslavia in 1991. Before, the territory of what is now the Republic of North Macedonia had been part of the Ottoman Empire and was later conquered by the Kingdom of Serbia during the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913.² After the Second World War, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia recognized Macedonians as one of the country's six constituent nations and founded the Socialist Republic of Macedonia. When it declared independence on 17 September 1991, this happened without the violence connected to other parts' secessions. However, it stirred new conflicts with neighbouring Greece.

To Greece, the name 'Republic of Macedonia' meant a potential for irredentist claims and was perceived as a threat to its own Northern region of Macedonia, bordering the former Yugoslav republic. Memories of the post-war period also mattered, when Yugoslavia had demanded the Greek region Macedonia at the Paris Conference 1946,

2 *Willemsen, Heinz* (2010): Das politische System Makedoniens. In: *Ismayr, Wolfgang*: Die politischen Systeme Osteuropas. VS Verlag. Wiesbaden, p. 967.

and later strongly supported the Greek communists during the civil war.³ In contrast, Macedonians saw the Greek opposition to their country's name as a threat to their national and ethnic identity, as well as to the existence of their only recently gained statehood. In December 1991, the Greek government formulated demands for its neighbour to change the name 'Macedonia', acknowledge that there are no territorial claims against Greece, and that there is no 'Macedonian minority' in Greece.⁴ These demands were made more concrete and in fact expanded when leaders of Greek political parties agreed on 13 April 1992 that 'Macedonia' should not be part of the new republic's name.⁵ After the failure of several diplomatic initiatives during the early 1990s, the conflict reached a climax when Greece established an economic embargo against its neighbour in 1994.⁶

The tensions were only overcome on 13 September 1995, when Greece and North Macedonia signed an Interim Agreement. While this agreement did not solve the name issue, North Macedonia accepted beside other points to change its flag (to no longer include the 'Vergina sun' symbol) and could ultimately access the UN under the provisional name 'Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia' (FYROM).⁷ Still, the dispute became tenser when North Macedonia aspired Euro-Atlantic integration and thus tried to join clubs for whose membership-bids Greece held a veto. When the Macedonian Gruevski administration received invitations for joining NATO (in 2008) and for opening accession negotiations with the EU (in 2009), Greece twice used its veto power to block North Macedonia from accessing under its constitutional name.

In the following years, international developments supported North Macedonia's claim on using the notion of being 'Macedonian' in some form, while the domestic developments made both international integration as well as a solution to the name issue less likely. At the international level, more and more countries recognized North Macedonia under its constitutional name as the 'Republic of Macedonia', crucially including also the United States.⁸ In addition, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled in December 2011 that Greece was in breach of the UN Interim Accord from

3 *Skordos, Adamantios* (2011): "Makedonischer Namensstreit und griechischer Bürgerkrieg. Ein kulturhistorischer Erklärungsversuch der griechischen Makedonien-Haltung 1991", *Südosteuropa Mitteilungen* 04/2011, pp. 36–55, available at <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=89765>.

4 *Tziampiris, A.* (2012): The Macedonian name dispute and European Union accession. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 12(1), 153–171, p. 154.

5 See footnote 4.

6 See footnote 4, p. 155.

7 Greece and The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia – Interim Accord. Signed at New York on 13 September 1995, available at: https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/MK_950913_Interim%20Accord%20between%20the%20Hellenic%20Republic%20and%20the%20FYROM.pdf (accessed 27 February 2019).

8 *Harlan, Chico* (2018): Macedonia agrees to a new name, ending a 27-year dispute with Greece, 12.06.2018, available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/macedonia-agrees-to-a-new-name-ending-a-27-year-dispute-with-greece/2018/06/12/9558b668-6e68-11e8-b4d8-eaf78d4c544c_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.92b557ec6470 (accessed 27 February 2019).

1995 with North Macedonia when blocking its accession to NATO in 2008.⁹ This did not further its claim to the name in a direct way, however, offered its struggle legitimacy.

At the domestic level, the erstwhile closed door to NATO and especially the EU led the Macedonian Gruevski administration continue with greater force on its nationalist policies combined with state capture. After Skopje's airport was named 'Alexander the Great' already before the first Greek veto in 2007 – thereby challenging the Greek monopoly on ancient Hellenic civilization – the government started in 2011 the project 'Skopje 2014'.¹⁰ This project aimed at the antiquization of the capital's city centre, building new and revamping existing buildings in a neo-classical style, mostly featuring large white columns. In addition, a triumphal arch and numerous statues were erected in praise of Macedonian (and also some Albanian) national heroes. The project was seen as a major affront in Athens and proof of its concerns that the government in Skopje pursued an irredentist agenda.

While the nationalist policies from Skopje did not help to soften up the uncompromising stance of the government in Athens, the strategy of state capture of the Gruevski government further distanced the country from NATO and EU. On the one hand, it was Gruevski himself who had managed to achieve via domestic reforms a recommendation for a start of EU accession talks in 2009.¹¹ On the other hand, his later policies mainly aimed at assuring his party's grip on power, even by skewing the political playing field and abusing state resources. As an EU expert group pointed out in the so-called 'Priebe Report' in 2015, in order to make political competition again viable, the Macedonian government had to improve oversight over the intelligence service UBK, which has the technical means to intercept communication without court orders; allow for an open investigation of evidence for electoral fraud; to stop pressuring the judiciary and the media, and let them act independently instead; and to allow for free and fair elections, especially by separating party and state and reforming the voter list.¹² This list of reform issues summed up very well the strategies of power preservation used by the ruling VMRO–DPMNE (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity) – DUI (Democratic Union for Integration) coalition during its time in power.

9 *Marusic, Sinisa Jakov / Zivanovic, Maia* (2018): Balkan Insight 'Timeline: The Path to Macedonia's 'Name' Deal', 29.09.2018, available at <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/09/29/macedonia-name-deal-timeline-in-pictures-09-28-2018/> (accessed 27 February 2019).

10 See footnote 9.

11 *European Commission* (2010): Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament, "Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2009-2010", COM(2009)533 final.

12 *EC* (2015): European Commission 'The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia: Recommendations of the Senior Experts' Group on Systemic Rule of Law Issues Relating to the Communications Interception Revealed in Spring 2015', 08.06.2015, available at http://www.balkananalysis.com/files/2016/06/20150608_recommendations_of_the_senior_experts_group.pdf (accessed 27 February 2019).

The rule of Nikola Gruevski ultimately culminated in a large crisis that shook the country between 2015-2017, ending with the former Prime Minister's loss of power in spring 2017 and his subsequent escape from judicial conviction in 2018 to Budapest.¹³ The crisis had started after opposition leader Zoran Zaev (SDSM – Social Democratic Union of Macedonia) published a series of wiretapped conversations among senior government officials about electoral fraud, blackmail, and meddling with justice. As a result, massive street protests erupted in Skopje and other cities.¹⁴ After a prolonged stalemate between the government and the opposition and early elections in December 2016, it was Gruevski's ethnic Albanian coalition partner DUI that would ultimately switch sides, walk away from coalition talks with VMRO-DPMNE, and form a new alliance with opposition leader Zaev. Still, it was not before violent riots of pro-government protesters on 27 April 2017 and the following pressure from the US and EU that President Ivanov allowed opposition leader Zaev to form a new Macedonian government. While the change of guard in Skopje meant the end of the skewed political playing field and offered a new opportunity to fulfil the EU's democratic conditionality, it also gave new impetus for a solution to the stalled name dispute – a precondition for any progress towards EU and NATO.

Unravelling a Gordian Knot

The change of government made way for a fresh start in the stalled negotiations with Greece. The new Macedonian SDSM-led coalition underlined Euro-Atlantic integration as its main campaign promise, and the only way of achieving tangible progress of joining NATO and opening accession negotiations with the EU was the solution of the name dispute with Greece. Two factors made success from the outset more likely than before: *First*, as international actors had since 2015 strongly supported the solution of the crisis, they were interested in bringing the country back on the Euro-Atlantic integration track as this would be a further means of stabilizing the country. It thus comes as no surprise that both EU and NATO were quick to underline that a solution of the name dispute would result in the aspired membership and start of the accession process.¹⁵ *Second*, in Greece the leftist Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left) government was a rather open partner for negotiations as it had no issue ownership

13 *Marusic, Sinisa Jakov* (2018): Balkan Insight 'Macedonia Ex-PM Gruevski Summoned to Serve Jail Sentence', 26.10.2018, available at <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/10/26/macedonia-s-gruevski-summoned-for-serving-jail-sentence-10-23-2018/> (accessed 27 February 2019). *Petruseva, Ana* (2018): Balkan Insight 'Gruevski's Escape Casts Dark Shadow Over Macedonia's Govt', 16.11.2018, available at <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/11/16/gruevski-s-escape-casts-dark-shadow-over-macedonia-s-govt-11-16-2018/> (accessed 27 February 2019).

14 For more information on the conflict, see *Hagemann, Christian* (2017): "Parliamentary Elections in Macedonia: Inconclusive Result, Continued Instability?", *Südosteuropa Mitteilungen* 01/2017, pp. 6-19, available at <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=522144>.

15 *Marusic, Sinisa Jakov* (2018): Balkan Insight 'Mattis Accuses Russia of Meddling in Macedonian Referendum', 17.09.2018, available at <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/09/17/mattis-supports-macedonian-referendum-condemns-russian-meddling-09-17-2018/> (accessed 27 February 2019).

of nationalist policies or conservative constituencies as well as no real history as part of the conflict. The coincidence of two leftist governments in Athens and Skopje that were ready to leave some of their countries' sensitivities aside thus also made a deal more likely.

It comes as no surprise that the government in Skopje invested during its first year in office most of its resources into establishing good neighbourly relations. The first progress happened in the relationship with Bulgaria, and already on 1 August 2017 Zaev signed an 'Agreement for good neighbourly relations' with his Bulgarian counterpart Boyko Borisov.¹⁶ Concerning the more difficult relationship with Greece, new Foreign Minister Nikola Dimitrov travelled to Athens in June 2017, thus just briefly after the formation of the new Macedonian SDSM government, in order to prepare the ground for renewed negotiations.¹⁷ These were then re-started at the end of 2017 in an UN-sponsored format under the guidance of mediator Matthew Nimetz.¹⁸ At the beginning of 2018, Tsipras and Zaev met for the first time in person at the World Economic Forum in Davos. As an early trust-building measure, Zaev announced shortly after the meeting that he would erase the name 'Alexander the Great' from both Skopje's international airport as well as the country's highway to Greece.¹⁹ North Macedonia's approach to the name dispute had clearly shifted from uncompromising confrontation to a much more open strategy of finding a solution and offering good will measures in advance.

Despite of the conducive preconditions, however, negotiations remained difficult. On the one hand, finding a suitable new name proved difficult as many different geographical ('North' or 'Northern', 'Upper') and historical ('New' or 'Ilinden') qualifiers were discussed.²⁰ Parallel to the negotiations, domestic conditions in both countries were also complicated. In both Greece and North Macedonia, people protested a potential name deal and thousands were mobilized to the streets in major cities. After signing the Prespa Agreement in June 2018, Greek police used tear gas against protesters trying to attack an event on the name deal in Thessaloniki.²¹ A similar

16 *European Western Balkans* (2017): 'Macedonia and Bulgaria sign Treaty on friendship, good neighbourliness and cooperation', 01.08.2017, available at <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2017/08/01/macedonia-bulgaria-sign-treaty-friendship-good-neighbourliness-cooperation/> (accessed 28 February 2019).

17 *Marusic, Sinisa Jakov* (2017): Balkan Insight 'Macedonia FM receives warm Welcome in Athens', 14.06.2017, available at <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/06/14/macedonia-fm-recvies-warm-welcome-in-athens-06-14-2017/> (accessed 27 February 2019).

18 *Marusic, Sinisa Jakov* (2017): Balkan Insight 'Macedonia and Greece Reboot Name Talks', 11.12.2017, available at <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/12/11/macedonia-greece-re-boot-name-talks-12-11-2017/> (accessed 27 February 2019).

19 *Marusic, Sinisa Jakov* (2018): Balkan Insight 'Macedonia to Scrap Alexander Signs to Appease Greece', 16.02.2018, available at <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/02/16/macedonia-officially-renames-airport-highway-to-appease-greece-02-15-2018/> (accessed 27 February 2019).

20 See footnote 19.

21 *BIRN* (2018): Balkan Insight 'Greek Police Use Tear Gas against Name Deal Protesters', 26.06.2018, available at <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/06/26/in-pictures-greek-police-use-tear-gas-against-name-deal-protesters-06-26-2018/> (accessed 27 February 2019).

situation occurred in Skopje with nine people injured.²² Besides street protests, which had also occurred during the negotiations, domestic politics too made a deal more difficult. In North Macedonia, the oppositional VMRO-DPMNE was opposed to a change of the country's constitutional name, and against the proposed solution in Bitola protested during the signing ceremony of the Prespa Agreement.²³ In a similar vein, the Greek opposition leader Kyriakos Mitsotakis (Nea Dimokratia – New Democracy) opposed a deal that would include a reference to 'Macedonia', while Tsipras' coalition partner Panos Kammenos (ANEL – Independent Greeks) even left the ruling coalition out of dissatisfaction with the solution and thereby left Tsipras without an own majority in parliament.²⁴

Nevertheless, governments in Athens and Skopje declared on 12 June 2018 that negotiations led by Foreign Ministers Nikos Kotzias and Nikola Dimitrov had reached an agreement.²⁵ This agreement was ultimately signed by the Foreign Ministers in the presence of Prime Ministers Zaev and Tsipras at the Prespa lake on 17 June 2018. The final text stipulates the following main terms of the solution:²⁶

- A name change towards 'Republic of North Macedonia' by constitutional amendment, to be used *erga omnes* (and to be concluded by the end of 2018).
- The nationality of citizens will be 'Macedonian / citizen of the Republic of North Macedonia', the language remains as the 'Macedonian language'.
- Greece will lift its veto on accession of North Macedonia to EU and NATO, to be notified immediately after implementation of the agreement by North Macedonia.
- Both parties respect their mutual territorial integrity and rule out all irredentist claims.
- Both parties acknowledge that their "understanding of 'Macedonia' and 'Macedonian' refers to a different historical context and cultural heritage" (Art. 7, 1); it also attributes to Greece the references of the two terms relating to "Hellenic civilization, history, culture, and heritage of that region from antiquity to present day" (Art. 7, 2).

22 *Marusic, Sinisa Jakov* (2018): Balkan Insight 'In pictures: Macedonia Name Protests Turn Violent', 18.06.2018, available at <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/06/18/in-pictures-macedonia-name-protest-turns-violent-06-18-2018/> (accessed 27 February 2019).

23 *Marusic, Sinisa Jakov* (2018): Balkan Insight 'Macedonia, Greece sign 'Historic' Name Deal', 17.06.2018, available at <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/06/17/macedonia-greece-sign-historic-name-deal-06-17-2018/> (accessed 27 February 2019).

24 Ekathimerini (2018): 'Mattis Accuses Russia of Meddling in Macedonian Referendum', 11.12.2018, available at <http://www.ekathimerini.com/235589/article/ekathimerini/news/pm-mitsotakis-spar-on-economy-prespes-name-deal> (accessed 27 February 2019). Greek City Times (2018): 'Mitsotakis slams Tsipras for "North Macedonia" name deal', 13.06.2018, available at <https://greekcitytimes.com/2018/06/13/mitsotakis-slams-tsipras-for-north-macedonia-name-deal/> (accessed 27 February 2019).

25 *Marusic, Sinisa Jakov* (2018): Balkan Insight 'Macedonia Deal Draws Praise Abroad, Anger at Home', 13.06.2018, available at <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/06/13/macedonia-name-deal-internationally-praised-criticised-at-home-06-13-2018/> (accessed 27 February 2019).

26 Final Agreement for the settlement of the differences as described in the United Nations Security Council Resolutions 817 (1993) and 845 (1993), the termination of the Interim Accord of 1995, and the establishment of a Strategic Partnership between the Parties, <https://vlada.mk/sites/default/files/dokumenti/spogodba-en.pdf> (accessed 27 February 2019).

Pulling the Linchpin or Using the Sword? A Bit of Both ...

After the Prespa Agreement was signed, the most difficult part of it was implementation. In North Macedonia, the ruling coalition needed a two-thirds majority in parliament, implying the inclusion of at least parts of the opposition into the process. In Greece, the government required 'only' an absolute majority to ratify the agreement. However, it also had to organize a majority for this as coalition partner Kammenos had walked away from the coalition because of the Prespa Treaty.

In North Macedonia, Prime Minister Zaev early announced that he would additionally organize a referendum on the name deal that was held on 30 September 2018. The referendum asked the question 'Do you support EU and NATO membership by accepting the agreement between Macedonia and Greece?'. The government received huge international support for the referendum, and just before polling day high ranking visitors to Skopje like German Chancellor Angela Merkel, EU Foreign Policy Representative Federica Mogherini, Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, and last but not least US Defence Secretary James Mattis visited Skopje to promote the referendum and the deal with Greece.²⁷ All of them put their political weight behind Zaev, underlining that upon passing the changes there would be straight progress towards EU and NATO accession.

In contrast, the largest opponent of the Prespa Agreement in Macedonia was still VMRO-DPMNE. As the party was pressured by its European allies as well as international actors to support the agreement, the party chose to not openly discard it. Rather, it argued that citizens should make up their mind whether they would participate in the referendum or boycott it.²⁸ The party's failure to participate in the campaign before the referendum and statements by President Ivanov and other high-ranking party figures made it nevertheless clear that the VMRO-DPMNE would aim at a silent boycott of the referendum to make it fail. As the quorum for the referendum to be valid was set at a high 50 per cent of all voters, and as this number was determined on the basis of the highly controversial voter's register, which many claim to be heavily bloated, failing the quorum through a boycott was the easiest way to undermine it. Against this background it is best understood why the Macedonian referendum ultimately failed in this regard with a participation rate of only 36.89 %, but a support rate of 91.45 %.²⁹ The failure to turn the referendum into a success was thus the first setback in the Prespa implementation process.

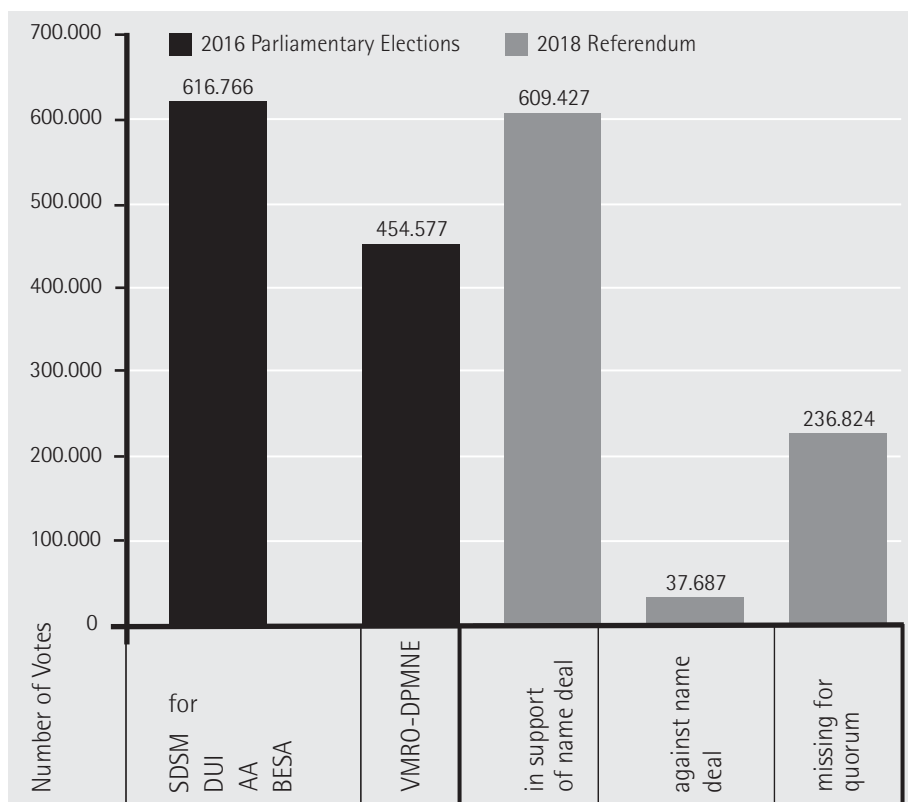
Still, the failed Macedonian quorum did not mean that the process ended, and some actors even went so far to declare the referendum a success on the basis of the high

27 See footnote 24.

28 *Marusic, Sinisa Jakov* (2018): Balkan Insight 'Referendum Campaign Wraps Up in Macedonia', 28.09.2018, available at <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/09/28/referendum-campaign-wraps-up-in-macedonia-09-28-2018/> (accessed 27 February 2019).

29 *State Election Commission of the Republic of North Macedonia* (2018): 'Referendum 2018', available at <http://referendum.sec.mk/Referendum/Results?cs=mk-MK&r=r&rd=r1> (accessed 27 February 2019).

Figure 1: Number of Votes in the Macedonian Parliamentary Elections in 2016 and in the Name Referendum in 2018 compared



Source: State Election Commission of North Macedonia ³⁰

support signalled by those who voted. The argument is in fact not easily dismissed: *Figure 1* shows that almost the same absolute number of voters came out in support for the name deal as voted in the parliamentary elections in 2016 for the parties supporting the referendum (SDSM, DUI, Alliance for Albanians/AA, and BESA). It could thus be argued that the referendum would have most likely been a success if VMRO-DPMNE voters had participated and not used the strategically better choice of undermining the quorum to make it fail. Even as mobilization seemed to have been poor in many areas – and was surprisingly low in Albanian stronghold regions of Tetovo (41.41 %), Kičevo (36.37 %), Gostivar (33.10 %) and Struga (40.15 %),³¹ that are usually champions of the country’s international and especially NATO integration – there were at least about as many supporters of the ruling coalition at the ballot

30 See footnote 29 and *State Election Commission of the Republic of North Macedonia* (2018): ‘Parliamentary Election 2016’, available at <https://rezultati2016.sec.mk/Parliamentary/Results?cs=mk-MK&r=r&rd=r1> (accessed 27 February 2019).

31 See footnote 29.

boxes as for the long-awaited and crucial parliamentary elections in December 2016. It thus seems that those supportive of the change of power came out again in support of the Prespa Agreement.

After the Macedonian referendum, Prime Minister Zaev underlined that he would still pursue the path foreseen in the Prespa Agreement and either try to convince parts of the opposition to support his name deal, or otherwise seek early elections in November 2018. This would have been necessary as the constitution sets high thresholds for constitutional changes: The process includes three rounds of voting, two of which have to be accepted with a two-thirds majority.³² Also, an early date to start the Prespa implementation process was necessary to make a Macedonian vote on the changes possible before the Greek parliamentary elections in 2019 that would most likely change the government in Athens and thus held the danger of reversing the deal. The process was therefore already started on 8 October 2018 when the Macedonian government brought the motion for constitutional change to parliament.³³ This first step presented already a crucial hurdle, as the required two-thirds majority would mean that at least parts of the VMRO-DPMNE caucus needed to support the deal. However, despite this difficulty, on 19 October 2018 it passed with 80 votes in support, including eight members of the opposition, who were immediately expelled from their party.³⁴

What had happened to make these Macedonian MPs change their mind? Briefly after the referendum, a debate started on whether the opposition's support for the name deal could be achieved by a potential amnesty for those MPs under investigation for the involvement in the 27 April 2017 parliamentary violence. Eight members of VMRO-DPMNE's parliamentary caucus founded a reconciliation committee in parliament and sponsored together with the ruling coalition an amnesty law for those not personally involved in the 2017 attacks.³⁵ This initiative came as no surprise, as four of the eight VMRO-DPMNE dissidents were in court at that time, three because of 27 April.³⁶ Still, the process even went further and on 27 December 2018 the

32 Constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia, Art. 130, 131, available at <http://www.constitution.org/cons/macedoni.htm> (accessed 27 February 2019).

33 *Marusic, Sinisa Jakov* (2018): Balkan Insight 'Macedonia Starts Procedure on Changing Countries Name', 08.10.2018, available at <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonia-starts-procedure-for-name-change-10-08-2018> (accessed 27 February 2019).

34 *Marusic, Sinisa Jakov* (2018): Balkan Insight 'Macedonia's Parliament backs Name Agreement with Greece', 19.10.2018, available at <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/xx-macedonia-parliament-votes-on-name-agreement-10-17-2018> (accessed 27 February 2019).

35 *Marusic, Sinisa Jakov* (2018): Balkan Insight 'Macedonia PM Backs Amnesty Deal 'in Principle'', 30.11.2018, available at <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/11/30/macedonia-pm-says-agreement-on-amnesty-reached-11-30-2018/> (accessed 27 February 2019). *Marusic, Sinisa Jakov* (2019): Balkan Insight 'Uncertainty Hangs over Macedonia's Final Name Vote', 09.01.2019, available at <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/01/09/uncertainty-hangs-over-macedonia-s-final-name-vote-01-09-2019/> (accessed 27 February 2019).

36 *Marusic, Sinisa Jakov* (2018): Balkan Insight 'Macedonia Opposition Demands Amnesty for Parliament Violence', 26.10.2018, available at <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonia-opposition-challenges-reconciliation-effort-10-25-2018> (accessed 27 February 2019).

Macedonian parliament also approved changes to the criminal code that received less public attention, but would most likely also have an effect on criminal investigations against members of the former ruling party.³⁷ There was thus clearly a political price paid for the Macedonian constitutional changes, but it seems an open question whether its size is yet clear.

While the second phase – bringing the constitutional amendments into parliament – could be passed rather easily with the ruling Macedonian coalition's majority, it was the third and final phase that was again dependent on oppositional support: The final voting in the *Sobranie*, the Parliament of North Macedonia, took place on 11 January 2019.³⁸ As the constitutional amendments were then passed with the required majority, it took the necessary steps on the Greek side to make the changes voted on in Skopje effective.

In Greece, implementing the Prespa Agreement was easier as Syriza needed only an absolute majority in parliament to ratify the Treaty. Still, the process was not much less dramatic after Syriza's coalition partner ANEL had left the coalition in protest against the Agreement.³⁹ It took thus negotiations with individual ANEL and also To Potami (The River) party's MPs to secure the necessary votes.⁴⁰ These were first granted when Prime Minister Tsipras set a motion of confidence in parliament, thereby making the process of implementing the Prespa Agreement also contingent of the parliament keeping him in power. Tsipras ultimately won the necessary majority on 17 January 2019. This opened the way for the vote on Prespa, which took place after a long debate on 25 January 2019.⁴¹ Finalising the Agreement, the Greek parliament ratified on 8 February 2019 as the first member state Macedonia's accession protocol to NATO.⁴² After this, both sides had fulfilled their pledges and on 13 February 2019 Greece's Northern neighbour changed its name to the 'Republic of North Macedonia'.⁴³

37 See footnote 33.

38 *Marusic, Sinisa Jakov* (2019): Balkan Insight 'Macedonia MPs pass Amendments to Change Country's Name', 11.01.2019, available at <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/01/11/macedonia-parliament-backs-first-of-four-name-amendments-01-11-2019/> (accessed 27 February 2019).

39 *Welt.de* (2019): 'Koalition vor dem Aus? – Tsipras fordert Vertrauensabstimmung', 13.01.2019, available at <https://www.welt.de/politik/ausland/article186980322/Umbenennung-von-Mazedonien-Koalition-vor-dem-Aus-Tsipras-fordert-Vertrauensabstimmung.html> (accessed 27 February 2019).

40 *Kadritzke, Niels* (2019): *Le Monde Diplomatique* 'Die dritte Tsipras-Regierung', 21.02.2019, available at https://monde-diplomatique.de/shop_content.php?colD=100139 (accessed 27 February 2019).

41 *Marusic, Sinisa Jakov* (2019): Balkan Insight 'Greek MPs Approve Historic Macedonia Name Agreement', 25.01.2019, available at <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/01/25/athens-approves-historic-macedonia-name-agreement-01-24-2019/> (accessed 27 February 2019).

42 *Sidiropoulou, Maria / Marusic, Sinisa Jakov* (2018): Balkan Insight 'Macedonia Awaits Greek Vote to Activate Name Change', 08.02.2018, available at <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/02/08/greece-macedonia-to-put-name-deal-in-practice-02-07-2019/> (accessed 27 February 2019).

43 *Kokkinides, Tasos* (2019): Greek Reporter 'FYROM officially changes name to North Macedonia', 13.02.2019, available at <https://greece.greekreporter.com/2019/02/13/fyrom-officially-changes-name-to-north-macedonia/> (accessed 27 February 2019).

Outlook

After more than two decades of conflict and one decade lost in the process of Euro-Atlantic integration, the name deal between Greece and North Macedonia is a significant breakthrough for both parties and a sign of hope that better times are about to come for the crisis-torn North Macedonia. Also, it is a much-needed success for the Macedonian Zaev government that came into office under difficult circumstances in 2017 and had connected its political fate to the name issue. There is a case to be made that this was the right decision. Overall, the name issue was the crucial bottleneck for Macedonian accession to NATO and EU. Accession to the EU, on the other hand, is strongly associated with the domestic reform process. While some argue that Macedonian domestic reforms were neglected in order to achieve the Prespa deal, in an ideal world the push coming from a start of EU accession negotiations could now be used by the Macedonian government and civil society to make a much stronger case for domestic reforms. Still, there are also several dangers remaining for the future development:

First, the Prespa deal was negotiated between two governments without much domestic consensus building efforts and integration of the opposition. While this made the process more efficient and speeded up an agreement, it left some open wounds with critics and leaves the question open whether all parties will accept the new realities. Overall, facing elections in Greece during 2019 with a likely change of government, and a discussion of potential snap elections in North Macedonia with an uncertain outcome, it must be underlined that the deal will ultimately also need the approval of Nea Dimokratia and VMRO-DPMNE, the strongest opposition parties and at the same time the deal's fiercest domestic critics in both countries. Nea Dimokratia leader Mitsotakis already seems to have made peace with the Agreement and signalled that he would not block North Macedonia's NATO accession.⁴⁴ It might thus well be that after Syriza took care of the issue, it could be much less politicized and contested after the parliamentary elections. The situation seems more difficult when it comes to VMRO-DPMNE. There should be an open door for the party to return to normal relations, but also a red line for its obstructive behaviour and unwillingness to distance itself from its conduct during its most recent period in government. As experience in other EU candidate countries shows, even EU-sceptic forces regularly continue their predecessors' course of reforms once the accession process is started and the incentive of membership is tangible and credible.⁴⁵ This, however, is also questionable due to the second potential danger.

Second, it is not entirely clear whether the EU is able to deliver on its promises to not only open negotiations, but potentially also speed up the Macedonian accession

44 *Bechev, Dimitar* (2019): Balkan Insight 'Referendum Campaign Wraps Up in Macedonia', 31.01.2019, available at <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/01/31/changing-names-for-north-macedonia-it-s-not-over-yet-01-30-2019/> (accessed 27 February 2019).

45 *Schimmelfennig, Frank* (2005): Strategic Calculation and International Socialization: Membership incentives, party constellations and sustained compliance in Central and Eastern Europe. *International Organization* 59(4), pp. 827-860.

process. On the one hand, enlargement is an unpopular topic within most EU member states, and major countries such as France and the Netherlands are often regarded as brakemen in the Western Balkans' integration process. On the other hand, elections to the European Parliament (EP), a potential postponement of Brexit, and the chance of a loss of the conservative/social democratic majority in the EP could mean that the EU will be focussed on other issues, or could even be paralyzed and without a Commission for months. This would then negatively impact the enlargement process and reform actors' ability to achieve promised progress.

Third, the way the Macedonian majority for the Prespa Agreement was organized left those Macedonians dissatisfied who had hoped for a strengthening of rule of law and for justice in the cases started by the Special Prosecution. While there are good reasons to believe that trading amnesty for political support of the name deal was ultimately worth it, the government has now to prove that this is not its general course of action and that it is still focussing on strengthening rule of law in the country. Otherwise, it might well happen that the government is abandoned by its domestic supporters, especially those active in the 'Colourful Revolution', and the argument might as well be used at some point against the country by critics of the EU enlargement process.

Fourth, the way the Prespa Agreement deals with both countries' history also leaves open much room for conflict. As Stefan Rohdewald wrote in a very insightful piece based on the latest themes in nationalism research, the deal gives the 'ancient Hellenic civilization' to Greece, but according to Rohdewald "any ethnic appropriation of history remains problematic". Crucially, the historical region of Macedonia "has been inhabited for thousands of years by populations that, in terms of their languages, religions, and denominations, have been heterogenous, and its borders have been blurred".⁴⁶ The task of the planned Joint Inter-Disciplinary Committee of Experts on historic, archaeological, and educational matters of the two countries will thus be a difficult, if not impossible one.

Currently, there is a huge corridor of potential developments – from the proposed Nobel Peace Prize⁴⁷ for Zaev and Tsipras and the start of EU accession negotiations of North Macedonia to a loss of support of the ruling Macedonian coalition due to lack of domestic reform efforts and a return of DUI after snap elections to its earlier coalition partner VMRO-DPMNE. It is now up to the Macedonian government to focus in a similarly eager manner on domestic reforms as it worked on the 'name deal'. And it is up to the EU, its member states, and political party groups to support these efforts in what could continue as a success story in a region often portrayed as only stagnating or backsliding.

46 *Rohdewald, Stefan* (2018): Citizenship, Ethnicity, History, Nation, Region, and the Prespa Agreement of June 2018 between Macedonia and Greece. *Südosteuropa*, 66(4), 577-593, p. 582 and p. 592.

47 *Ekathimerini* (2019): 'Referendum Campaign Wraps Up in Macedonia', 13.02.2019, available at <http://www.ekathimerini.com/237639/article/ekathimerini/news/tsipras-zaev-nominated-for-nobel-peace-prize-report-says> (accessed 27 February 2019).