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KAS Offices in Greece and North Macedonia



Greece and North Macedonia on the way towards normalisation

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It has been three years since North Macedonia and Greece signed the so-called Prespa agreement which put an end to the name dispute that had been going on since North Macedonia gained independence. Based on the agreement, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia was renamed North Macedonia. For the latter, the most important result was that Greece dropped its resistance against the country's accession to NATO and the EU. However, while North Macedonia became a NATO member about one year later, Macedonians are still waiting for progress with regard to EU accession.

Nevertheless, the Prespa agreement¹ can serve as a good example of how to find a way to balance bilateral conflicts in a region of countries that are new to statehood or have regained independence after a long period of time, where history and identity policy can still determine the politics of the day. Three years after the agreement was signed, the KAS Offices in both countries carried out a survey to find out what the citizens think about it. In the country report at hand, the directors of both offices describe the results from the viewpoint of their country of deployment.

North Macedonia

Due to the unfulfilled hopes of starting EU accession negotiations soon, the Prespa agreement remains controversial at political level in North Macedonia. However, the latest KAS survey shows increasing acceptance among Macedonian citizens in terms of practical policy.

The name and symbols dispute since North Macedonia became independent

When Yugoslavia was dissolved and its constituent republics became independent, the Republic of Macedonia kept its name after gaining independence in 1991. A flag depicting the Vergina Sun, an ancient symbol, was introduced. Greece, seeing itself as the only entity entitled to the legacy of ancient Macedonia and its symbols, considered the flag to represent an appropriation of Greek history. Moreover, some articles of the Macedonian constitution were interpreted to contain claims over Greek territory. In association with the EU, Greece asserted a first constitutional amendment as early as 1992, after which the Macedonian constitution explicitly excluded territorial claims to neighbours. Also, Macedonia was

¹ The agreement's full text is available in English on <https://vmacedonia.com/politics/macedonia-greece-agreement.html>.

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admitted to the UN only under the provisional reference "Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia FYROM", which it had to use in most of its international relations.

In Greece, the conflict remained a politically heated topic, with the neighbouring country being colloquially referred to as Skopje, its inhabitants as Skopians, and its language as Skopian, which Macedonians found very derogatory, especially against the background of the vivid economic and tourist exchange between both countries. The flag issue was decided in Greece's favour in 1995, and Macedonia

adopted a new flag, which has been in use ever since. Early on, Macedonia decided on its orientation towards the West, pursued membership in NATO and EU, and was granted the status of an EU candidate country in 2005. Even though the European Council recommended to initiate EU accession negotiations with Macedonia in 2009, Greece continued to block that path, since, in its view, the country, based on its name, unrightfully claimed the cultural legacy of the ancient non-Slavic Macedonians. Around 2010, international mediation brought some movement to the debate on renaming the country, while the governments of both states had to act very carefully for reasons of internal policy, and the Macedonian side declared that any change would depend on a referendum, which had to be carefully prepared if approval was to be won. However, it took nearly another decade to make the final step that was reached with the signing of the Prespa agreement on 17 June 2018.

The Prespa agreement, referendum and constitutional amendment in North Macedonia

As the Greek-Macedonian dialogue was resumed in early 2018, then Greek prime minister Tsipras sent a signal that, supplemented by a geographical denomination, the name "Macedonia" could be accepted. On June 12, Tsipras and Macedonian prime minister Zaev agreed to compromise on the name "North Macedonia" and signed the agreement at lake Prespa. In North Macedonia, however, the agreement's constitutional implementation had to be approved in a referendum and supported by a two-thirds majority in parliament. This, along with the criticism of substance, is the main reason why the name change has been called into question ever since, especially by the largest opposition party, VMRO-DPMNE. The referendum was not binding for the government, and the turnout was as low as 36,91% (while the constitution defines a quorum of 50+1% for referenda). Out of those voters, a clear majority of 94% answered the referendum question, "Are you in favour of membership in the European Union and NATO by supporting the agreement signed on 17 June by the foreign ministers of Greece and Macedonia?", in the affirmative.

On 11 January 2019, the Macedonian Assembly accepted the constitutional amendment on the name change. The VMRO-DPMNE, however, claims to this day that the support from some of its party members was achieved by means of pressure and bribery. Therefore, the party officially holds up the position that, in the case it will come into government, it will review the name change under constitutional law and, if necessary, revoke it. Referring to the state by its new name is still being called into question, an attitude that is fuelled even more by the "left wing right wing populist" party LEVICA ("The Left") that has been quite successful at winning over nationalist-minded voters from the VMRO-DPMNE which, in turn, reacts by striving for a strongly nationalist orientation itself.

Practical effects and problems of the name change

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The aspects of the agreement that were most important to Greece, such as changing the constitutional name and declaring today's Macedonian language as Slavic (and not Greek), without any link to the ancient Macedonian idiom, were relatively easy and comprehensible to implement.

However, according to the Prespa agreement, only state institutions and public entities are obliged to adapt their names. During the recent European Football Championship, the Greek Government criticised the Macedonian team for playing under the acronym FFM (Фудбалска Федерација на Македонија/ Fudbalska Federacija na Makedonija) and demanded that the association be renamed, adding an "N" for North Macedonia (see also Henri Bohnet's article). The Macedonian Foreign Minister pointed out that the association was not a state organisation, quoting the Prespa agreement that does not foresee renaming in this case.²

The Prespa agreement's terminology provides for further pitfalls that can lead to unintended faux pas in North Macedonia, especially for countries that are not involved. Thus, the name change foresees the denomination "North" to be added to the state name only, while the citizens of North Macedonia remain Macedonians, the language is still called Macedonian, and the modifier, e.g. for describing the origin of things, is not affected by the change either, so that cheese from North Macedonia remains Macedonian cheese, whereas neither "North Macedonians" nor "North Macedonian cheese" exist. Given that the name change was a painful experience even for many supporters of the Prespa agreement, getting the terms wrong can be a very sensitive issue. Country codes do not follow a clear pattern with regard to the new official name either. While the abbreviation NMK is used for licence numbers in North Macedonia, the country code for international football matches officially remains MKD, a fact that led to yet another complaint from Greece, which considered UEFA's use of the acronym "MKD" as unlawful. In this matter, however, the Prespa agreement was clearly on the Macedonian side.³

Acceptance of the Prespa agreement for the sake of EU accession

North Macedonia's willingness to change its name was undoubtedly triggered by the hope to unblock EU and NATO accession by resolving the dispute with neighbouring Greece, so that expectations of getting there in return were great. While NATO membership was achieved soon, the expected announcement to start EU accession negotiations at the EU summit in late 2019 was blocked mainly by France, but also by the Netherlands and Denmark. The fact that the refusal was rather directed at Albania, which was in the package with North Macedonia, did not change the devastating effect of the signal that was sent to the latter. Thereupon, prime minister Zaev resigned and snap elections were called, which, however, due to the beginning Covid-19 pandemic, could not take place until Summer 2020. At the EU summit in March 2020, the three member states gave up their opposition to the initiation of accession negotiations with North Macedonia, but this did not help the country anymore, as Bulgaria has been blocking the process ever since, due to its much more far-reaching identity policy issues with North Macedonia.⁴

² <https://www.n-tv.de/sport/fussball-em/Nordmazedonien-Trikot-erzuernt-Griechen-article22620796.html>

³ <https://www.euronews.com/2021/06/14/greece-complains-to-uefa-over-north-macedonia-acronym-at-euro-2020>

⁴ *Bulgaria challenges North Macedonia's linguistic and cultural independence from Bulgaria and refers to its southern neighbour as Tito's creation for Yugoslavia.*

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The experience of not having achieved any progress in the efforts towards EU accession to date in return for the name change gives rise to doubts about the value of the agreement, not only from the viewpoint of Macedonians. It also puts pressure on political stakeholders not to sign any agreement that includes significant concessions to Bulgaria, for they cannot be sure whether that would really lead to progress towards EU accession. Therefore, one has to state that the EU's reputation has suffered, and trust in its possibilities as a mediator and strong political stakeholder has diminished.

Current survey on the Prespa agreement

The survey carried out by the KAS Offices in Greece and North Macedonia three years after the Prespa agreement was signed reflects the heated atmosphere in North Macedonia due to being stuck in the EU accession process. Furthermore, it has to be taken into account that 20 to 25% of North Macedonia's population are ethnic Albanians, who were less emotionally involved in the name dispute, which rather addressed the identity policy of ethnic Macedonians. However, ethnic solidarity in North Macedonia should not be underestimated. With regard to the current political situation, the survey carried out in North Macedonia shows a similar result as the one carried out in Greece, with the relevance of foreign policy issues being assessed at 9%, far behind economy at 41% and health care at 40%. Furthermore, the assumption that external stakeholders were the drivers of the agreement is supported by 79% of the Macedonian and 77% of the Greek respondents.⁵ Macedonians and Greeks also agree that the Prespa agreement was not in their respective country's national interest (48% in North Macedonia, 47% in Greece).

Nevertheless, it is very interesting to see that only 30% of the respondents would have been against the agreement if they had known beforehand that there would be no progress with regard to EU accession. This value is striking, given that only 39% of the respondents consider the agreement beneficial for their country, which means that a significant share of the respondents supports the agreement, even though they perceive little advantages and effects. This attitude is confirmed by the answers to the question about how to deal with the agreement in the future: only 30% would like to abolish it completely, while 32% would renegotiate it, and 30% are in favour of implementing the agreement as it is. In combination with more than half of the respondents supporting the statement that the agreement fostered freedom and stability in the region, this shows that a significant part of the North Macedonian population sees a benefit from the *modus vivendi* with the Prespa agreement. Anyway, the situation and perspective with regard to foreign policy are different for North Macedonia now, three years after it was signed, due to the current conflict with Bulgaria. Asked about threats from other countries, Greece was not named by anyone, while 46% opted for Bulgaria, which is now the frontrunner for Macedonians.

Concluding, it can be said that critical acceptance of the compromise of the Prespa agreement, which Macedonians see as a far greater sacrifice compared to the Greeks, prevails. The acceptance would be much higher if the expectations concerning the start of EU accession negotiations had been met in due time. On the one hand, internal doubts about the agreement would diminish, and on the other, there would be more room for

⁵ For the purposes of this text, all citizens of North Macedonia are referred to as Macedonians, regardless of their ethnic group.

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subjective issues and future-oriented topics within North Macedonia's political debates. Many Macedonians already accept that political compromise on sensitive issues concerning identity policy includes concessions as well as benefits, even if they see themselves as second winners only. Nevertheless, the EU should not forget that North Macedonia needs a clear European perspective in order to modernise, even if it still has to put a lot of effort into moving towards EU accession. Although, from an objective EU perspective, China, Russia and, to some extent, Turkey do not represent real geopolitical options, they can undermine the acceptance of Western values and liberal democracy, which would mean that agreements like the one signed in Prespa would become even more difficult to negotiate in the future. Against the background of the many smouldering bilateral conflicts in the region, that would not be a good outlook on the future.

Greece

An oath of manifestation draws closer, for Greece cannot reverse the three years that have passed since the name issue with its northern neighbour was resolved. It is time to look forward and to act.

One tweet can unleash a storm of political indignation, that we know since Donald Trump, and if the matter is about the popular sport football, we should brace ourselves. That is exactly what happened lately at the European Football Championship, when the national team of North Macedonia entered in dresses labelled FFM, Football Federation of Macedonia, and prime minister Zaev tweeted about his "Macedonia" in a storm of enthusiasm. What had happened to the geographical denomination, "North"? Left out. Even after the team of the small Balkan country was eliminated from the Championship, the indignation is still palpable in neighbouring Greece, notwithstanding the official apology from Skopje. In Athens' political circles, patriots lost their temper, many of whom belong to the governing right wing liberal Nea Dimokratia. Three years after the historic Prespa agreement on the name issue was signed, the EPP member party has to show its true colours: yes or no to normalisation? As a recent survey carried out by the KAS Office in Athens in cooperation with the Greek think tank Eliamep shows, the majority of Greek citizens has already taken a step further. However, as we can see from the results, many steps remain to be taken by both sides.

A matter of identity

The Hellenes are proud of their culture, language and history, which they preserved in spite of many centuries of foreign rule, and therefore sensitive to any kind of external appropriation. Hence, two thirds of the Greek population over 55 think that their culture is superior to other nations' cultures. Therefore, it is not very surprising that many Greeks have not yet overcome the compromise named "Prespa" after the two small border lakes. However, the survey revealed one pleasant result: the northern neighbour is not perceived as an enemy or threat. Unsurprisingly, that is the privilege of eastern neighbour Turkey. Nevertheless, Greeks are having trouble with "North Macedonia": almost half of the respondents (48%) still think that the compromise is not in Greece's national interest.

At the same time, little more than half (52%) agree that "Prespa" fosters stability and freedom in the region. "See?!", the external observer would like to ask the other half, for the actual fragility of the situation in the Balkans is reflected in a decision of the new US

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administration: unlike his predecessor Trump, President Biden wants to unite rather than divide Europe. It seems that he is fed up with populists and other disruptors who want to prevent the region from being tied to the West. Biden's "executive order" as of 8 July stipulates imposition of sanctions on persons who promote the "destabilisation" of the Western Balkans. Those who want to thwart the agreement between Athens and Skopje are probably included.

Easy to sign, but hard to fill with life

Anyway, the implementation of the agreement has only just begun. The transition period of three years laid down in the agreement has now ended. In Athens, it had actually been planned to adopt some legal amendments to the benefit of economic relations between the two countries within the transition period and before the summer, if possible away from the still easily irritated public. But then Zaev's twitter bomb exploded, and the government postponed the voting until September, not only out of anger, but also out of fear – fear to provoke dissenting votes from the own ranks. For even though prime minister Mitsotakis successfully displays Nea Dimokratia's liberal economic face, there are some nationalists in their own ranks who have known how to make political capital out of the Macedonian issue in the past, with former prime minister Samaras at their head. Samaras does not trust the success of the moderate Mitsotakis and makes his opposition to all matters concerning Prespa very clear at every possible opportunity.

Hence, there will have to be an act of manifestation for the government party, rather sooner than later, for when the Prespa agreement was signed, Nea Dimokratia was enjoying the privileges of being in opposition, mobilising opponents of the agreement. Now, political reality is catching up with the party. Whether there will be a crucial test between the successful current prime minister, who managed to significantly improve Greece's international reputation during the pandemic, and the proud old guard of the party, which has caused many a misunderstanding between Athens and its European and American partners, also depends on smart timing.

Actually, people have other worries

In fact, during the ongoing pandemic, Greeks worry much more about matters of health (46%) and economy (41%) than foreign affairs, as shown by the results of the survey quoted in this text, which is published on the homepage of KAS Athens Office. However, most of the Greeks cannot forget the name issue that had remained unresolved for so many years. 77% of the respondents think that the Prespa agreement was forced on them by foreign powers, namely the EU and the US. In return, the then government led by Syriza had to make concessions and received relief for overcoming the financial crisis. 42% of the respondents would like to revise the agreement if possible. Nevertheless, we can see that the Greeks are slowly but surely becoming more relaxed in terms of dealing with their northern neighbour. Thus, we witness a decrease in the number of those who accuse North Macedonia of falsifying its own history or think that, based on its name, it could have territorial claims in Greece. On the other hand, the number of those who think that the Prespa compromise was necessary is rising demonstrably.

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Keep calm and carry on

Even if we consider those positive trends as an orientation, everyone involved has still a lot of work to do. Prespa is not self-implementing. Now, it is time to intensify cooperation, as well as ties in politics and society and personal exchange. With the pandemic fading, borders being re-opened and the European Football Championship just having ended, this summer might not yet be the right time for normality, but definitely for initiating the normalisation of relations between both countries. Hardly any Greek has ever set foot in the neighbouring country to the north. Only few are aware that the majority population of North Macedonia is Christian Orthodox and not, as many assume, Muslim. And who would have guessed that, at least this year, North Macedonia's football team would get further than former European champion Greece?

It is therefore encouraging to see that more and more people on both sides of the border, especially youth, are committed to overcoming common challenges, such as climate change. It is precisely this area which politics is now also getting involved in across the borders: in early July, the environment ministers of both Greece and North Macedonia (together with their Albanian colleague) had an online meeting in order to do more for the protection of the natural and cultural region of Prespa. Presumably, there was little talk about football.

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