

THE PROSPECTS OF THE PRESPA AGREEMENT

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS IN NORTH MACEDONIA AND GREECE



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Skopje and Athens, June 2021⁴

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⁴ This study was made possible through funding from the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

After three years since its signing, the Prespa agreement is still a sensitive topic for many Macedonians. The implementation of the Agreement is touching upon delicate issues related to ethnic and national identities which are perceived as key factors for resentment of the Prespa agreement. However, a significant number of Macedonian citizens have a more pragmatic outlook on the resolution of the name dispute and the significance of the Prespa agreement as a compromise that benefits both countries. The Prespa agreement is still seen as a way forward for North Macedonia's EU accession aspirations, despite the recent unfavorable outcomes in that regard.

On the other hand, the Prespa agreement still generates significant divisions among the Macedonian public. This is especially evident among the ethnic Macedonian citizens who are deeply divided in their assessment of the pros and cons of the outcomes of the Prespa agreement. In addition, there is a substantial split in perceptions between the two largest ethnic groups in the country. The ethnic Albanians have overwhelmingly positive views on the Prespa agreement, which is predominantly perceived through a pragmatic prism. In contrast, almost half of the ethnic Macedonians have a negative perception on the outcomes from the Prespa agreement.

On the Greek side, the public opinion seems more ambiguous about relations with North Macedonia than before. There are clear signs of moderation in attitudes, but at the same time on some key issues the majority opinions remain rejectionist or less compromising. Despite the main foreign policy focus being on Turkey, relations with North Macedonia also carry some weight for the public opinion. The majority of Greeks oppose the idea of the compromise on the name, but the percentage of those who reject it has decreased and the percentage of those who accept a compromise solution has increased. There also seems to be shift in attitudes on the Prespa Agreement itself: the number of those who accept that the agreement brought benefits to Greece seem to be increasing. Among those who are still negative about the agreement, the majority appears concerned with the Prespa Agreement provisions about the question of ethnicity and language, a finding that shows that the main arguments of the opposition of the time have been convincing.

The picture is also mixed when it comes to the various arguments that have been advanced by the political forces that have supported or opposed the agreement. The majority of Greeks consider the agreement as a painful but necessary compromise ('αναγκάιος συμβιβασμός'), but still more respondents consider that the agreement undermines national interest ('εθνικά επιζήμια συμφωνία') than the opposite. And while the majority of respondents concede that without the Prespa Agreement practically everybody would call North Macedonia as simply Macedonia, the majority is also convinced that a yet more beneficial deal for Greece could have been reached had Athens left the issue to be settled in the future. Moreover, while the percentage of those who would like to see the agreement annulled is low, the relative majority of respondents would like to see the Greek government attempting to amend the deal, with a bit more than one in three Greeks wishing actually its full implementation. Finally, in a slightly conspiratorial mood, the majority of respondents believe that the Prespa

Agreement was imposed on Greece by foreign powers, while most Greeks believe that virtually all the international actors involved in mediation efforts for the name dispute effectively favoured the side of North Macedonia and worked against Greece's interests.

Foreign Policy Issues

Policy priorities

Greece: Foreign policy appears to be a very low priority for Greek respondents. Economic considerations (a long-term problem for ordinary Greeks) and health (due to the current pandemic) dominate respondents' preferences. Importantly, this is despite the fact that relations with Turkey are at the lowest point in over two decades and concerns over escalation of the confrontation with Ankara are increasing. This finding shows that relations with North Macedonia are cultivated in a period when foreign policy issues, especially when they are not related to Turkey, are of very limited interest to Greek respondents.

North Macedonia: An almost identical viewpoint can be found in the Macedonian case. Currently, foreign policy issues are of no concern for the Macedonian citizens despite the ongoing dispute with Bulgaria and the stalemate in the accession process of the country. On the other hand, as expected, in the wake of the global pandemic, health and the state of the economy are prioritized as the most concerning issues.

Policy priorities		
%	Greece	North Macedonia
Economy	41	41
Foreign policy	8.5	9
Health	46	40
Something else	4	7
DK/DA	0.5	3

Importance of foreign policy issues

Greece: Greek respondents overwhelmingly consider relations with Turkey to be of utmost importance. This is a reflection of the concerns over Greece's security due to the perceived Turkish threat and the recent and ongoing phase of crisis in bilateral relations. Still, a not-insignificant portion of respondents (6 out of 10) consider relations with North Macedonia to be of importance. This is linked to Greek respondents' emotional reactions on the Macedonia question and also due to the return of the question in the policy agenda through the Prespa Agreement.

North Macedonia: In the case of North Macedonia, relations with the EU continue to be extremely important for more than 80% of the respondents. A similar perception is attached to the relations with virtually all of the neighboring countries. The relations with Greece particularly are considered to be important for 50% of the population, which as in the Greek case could be a consequence of the new post-Prespa environment in the relations between the two states.

Importance of foreign policy issues				
	Greece		North Macedonia	
Relations with... (%)	Not at all important + little important	Quite important + Very important	Not at all important + little important	Quite important + Very important
Bulgaria			34	47
Turkey	6	93	/	/
Greece			29	50
North Macedonia	29	59	/	/

Threat from other states

Greece: More than seven in ten Greek respondents consider Turkey to be a country that poses a threat to Greece. This is a standard response in Greek polls, which typically show that the majority, and sometimes the vast majority, of Greeks believe that their country is under threat from Turkey. North Macedonia does not register as a threat to Greece among Greek respondents.

North Macedonia: While a majority of Macedonians do not feel threatened by any country, 40% of those that do, enlist Bulgaria as the country that poses a threat to North Macedonia. This sentiment is to be expected as it is a reflection of the strained bilateral relations between the two countries and the recent decision of the Bulgarian government not to support North Macedonia's start of the accession negotiations with the EU. Greece is not perceived as a threat.

Threat from other states		
(%)	North Macedonia	Greece
Bulgaria	46	/
Albania	13	0.5
Kosovo	8	/
Turkey	1	72.5
Greece	0	/
North Macedonia	/	0

Relative international strength and relations with neighboring countries

Greece: The vast majority of Greek respondents consider their country to be more powerful than North Macedonia. This largely applies to the rest of Greece's immediate neighbors, with the exception of Turkey, which Greek respondents consider to be more powerful than their country.

North Macedonia: Roughly 70% of the population consider the country's position in the international environment as weak. This sentiment is even more present in the perceptions on Greece, as 8 out of 10 respondents consider Greece as more powerful actor.

Relative strength in the international scene and relations to neighboring countries				
(%)	North Macedonia is ...than		Greece is...than	
	Stronger	Weaker	Stronger	Weaker
Bulgaria	24	72	89.5	6.5
Albania	38	53	96	2
Kosovo	62	29		
Serbia	13	84		
Turkey	/	/	36.5	60
North Macedonia	/	/	93.5	4
Greece	15	81	/	/

Views on the Name Dispute and the Prespa Agreement

Importance of the name dispute before the Prespa agreement

Greece: More than seven in ten Greek respondents declare that the name dispute had some significance for them, with most of them (50 % of all respondents) considering it as very important. Only one in four Greek respondents declare that the name dispute was of limited or no importance to them. These findings show the importance that the Greek society assigned to the question even thirty years after the start of the diplomatic dispute over the name Macedonia.

North Macedonia: Slightly more than half of the respondents in North Macedonia perceived the name dispute as an important issue from this time perspective. Albanians

were significantly more interested to solve the issue (75%) in contrast to 50% of the Macedonians. In comparison to the perceptions in Greece, more than a third of respondents in North Macedonia did not attach significant importance to the name dispute.

	Importance of the name dispute before the Prespa agreement	
Important... (%)	Greece	North Macedonia
Very	50	38
Somewhat	21.5	18
Little	11.5	10
Not at all	16.5	32

Acceptance of compromise

Greece: A majority of Greek respondents continue to oppose the idea of North Macedonia having any connection to the term 'Macedonia'. Six in ten respondents would prefer that there is no reference to the term 'Macedonia' in the name of the country, while 37 % would accept a compromise solution that would include the term in some form. The uncompromising views have decreased since the period of the negotiations for reaching the Prespa Agreement, but remain the majority view, as it has been the case consistently since the early 1990s.

North Macedonia: There is a deep division among Macedonian citizens on the outlooks of the solution of the name dispute if hypothetically the Prespa agreement hadn't been signed. While roughly a third of the population would have accepted a composite name that contains the word Macedonia, an additional 17% would have been satisfied with any solution. On the other hand, almost half of the population would have been against any compromise on the name of the country. These cleavages are additionally amplified when the ethnicity demographics are analyzed. While roughly 6 out of 10 ethnic Macedonians are rejecting compromises over the name of the country, almost 80% of the ethnic Albanians would have favored a negotiated solution. This is an expected distribution of perceptions, as the name dispute carries emotional and identitarian implications for the ethnic Macedonians, as opposed to the more pragmatic outlooks on the solution of the name dispute among the ethnic Albanian population in North Macedonia.

Acceptance of compromise		
%	Greece	North Macedonia
A Composite name that will contain the term Macedonia such as north Macedonia	37.5	32
Any solution	/	17

Against any compromise/solution	/	46
No reference to the term Macedonia	60.5	/

Effects of the latest deadlock in the EU accession negotiations with North Macedonia on the support for the Prespa agreement

North Macedonia: Interestingly, the political developments in the post-Prespa period in the case of North Macedonia did not have an overwhelmingly negative effect on the public support for the Agreement. When hindsight in regard to the lack of progress in North Macedonia's EU accession process is taken into consideration, still roughly 40% of the population would have strongly supported the Agreement, while an additional 30% attach some probability that they would have supported the agreement. These sentiments indicate that the general population to some extent puts value in the Prespa agreement that goes beyond the gains in the EU accession perspectives of the country.

%	If you knew that starting the EU accession negotiations will be still postponed after the Prespa agreement, Would you have supported it? (Only MKD respondents)
Yes	39
Maybe	31
No	30

How beneficial has the Prespa agreement been for North Macedonia and Greece

Greece: The findings seem to be positive in this question since the percentage of those who consider the Prespa Agreement beneficial is equal to those who see it as harmful. More specifically, the percentage of those who see no or little benefit from the agreement and the percentage of who view some or many benefits in the agreement are both at 35.5 %. Thus, there are now largely as many respondents who view the agreement approvingly as there are respondents who reject it.

North Macedonia: On the other hand, in the Macedonian case, there is also a growing resentment of the Prespa agreement, when perceived from a time distance of three years. While roughly one third of the population believe that the Agreement is still beneficial for the country, 40% perceive it as harmful. As in the previous instances, there is a significant disparity in the distribution of attitudes that goes along ethnic lines.

In your opinion, from this time distance, how much beneficial was the Prespa Agreement for North Macedonia/Greece?			
Relations with... (%)	Very beneficial + somewhat beneficial	Neither useful, nor harmful	Somewhat harmful + Very harmful
Greece	35.5	26	35.5
North Macedonia	39	22	35

Reasons for opposition to the Prespa agreement

Greece: Among those respondents who still disapprove of the agreement or remain neutral over it, 42 % reject because they consider that it gave to the other side "ethnicity and language"; this has been the main argument of the former opposition in rejecting the agreement. Another 33 % reject the agreement because they believe that as a result Greece "gave up" the name 'Macedonia', while 18.5 % reject it for all the above reasons combined.

North Macedonia: Those Macedonians that oppose the Prespa agreement base their stance on the perception that the Agreement has given up the name of the country (39% among ethnic Macedonians) and those that think everything (name, ethnicity and language) was not preserved (36% of ethnic Macedonians). When considered separately, loss of either ethnicity or language aren't considered as being a significant disadvantage of the Prespa agreement.

Reasons for opposition to the Prespa agreement?		
%	Greece	North Macedonia
That it gave up ethnicity	42	6
That it gave up the language		7
That it gave the name	33	37
(spontaneously - if insists) All of them	18.5	31
None of these	5.5	13

Views on the name dispute: who was right?

Greece: Nearly six in ten Greek respondents (58.5 %) consider that Greece was right in the name dispute. But there is a noteworthy 33 % of respondents who consider that both countries were right in this dispute.

North Macedonia: Half of the population population in North Macedonia believe that the policy of their country in the name dispute has been right. However, roughly 20% of

respondents believe that both countries have had valid arguments behind their position on the dispute.

Views on the name dispute: who was right?		
%	Greece	North Macedonia
Greece was right	58.5	14
Both countries	33.5	23
North Macedonia was right	3	52

Prespa agreement as a compromise

Greece: Almost six in ten Greek respondents agree that the agreement was a compromise that had to be made. Three out of ten respondents disagree with that position. Clearly the majority of the public opinion consider that, despite being painful, this was a necessary compromise.

North Macedonia: Almost half of the population in North Macedonia recognizes that the Prespa agreement has been an essential compromise between the two countries. A third of the population on the other hand disagrees with that assumption.

Prespa agreement as a compromise		
%	Greece	North Macedonia
Strongly agree + Somewhat agree	59.5	47
Neither agree, nor disagree	8.5	17
Strongly disagree + Somewhat disagree	31	32

Prespa agreement undermines the national interest of Greece/North Macedonia

Greece: Almost one in two Greek respondents view the Prespa Agreement as undermining national interest ('εθνικά επ ιζήμια' in the Greek questionnaire, a term that is more emotionally loaded). This particular formulation has been one of the main statements repeatedly used by the opposition during the turbulent period after the signing of the Prespa Agreement, and especially in parliamentary debate during the ratification process. In contrast, nearly four in ten respondents do not agree with that thesis.

North Macedonia: The perception that the Prespa agreement is nationally damaging is shared by almost half of the Macedonian population in North Macedonia. The ethnic

divisions are also evident in this case as this sentiment is mainly supported by the ethnic Macedonian respondents.

Prespa agreement undermines our national interest? /		
%	Greece	North Macedonia
Strongly agree + Somewhat agree	48	47
Neither agree, nor disagree	11	15
Strongly disagree + Somewhat disagree	38.5	35

The Prespa agreement as a factor of stability and peace in the Balkans

Greece: One in two (52 percent) Greek respondents agree that the Prespa Agreement helped stability and peace in the Balkans, while one in three (32 percent) think that it did not actually help. Thus the majority accepts this view, which was one of the arguments that the Greek government of the time used to advocate for a compromise.

North Macedonia: The public opinion in North Macedonia is generally supportive of the perception that the Prespa agreement has strengthened peace and stability in the Balkans. However, more than a third of the population does not share the same sentiment, which indicates that one of the dominant endorsing narratives for the Prespa agreement in the international community hasn't been convincing for a significant portion of the public.

Prespa Agreement helped the stability and peace in the Balkans;		
%	Greece	North Macedonia
Strongly agree + Somewhat agree	52	45
Neither agree, nor disagree	13.5	14
Strongly disagree + Somewhat disagree	32	37

Prespa Agreement prevented a better solution for the name dispute in the future

Greece: More than one in two (53 percent) Greek respondents agree with the argument that with the Prespa Agreement Greece has lost the opportunity to negotiate a better deal in the future. This is an argument that has been promoted by the parliamentary opposition at the time of the Prespa Agreement. Still, one in three (32 percent) respondents do not agree that Greece has lost the opportunity to negotiate a better deal.

North Macedonia: The Macedonian public is also divided in regards to the assessment of the outcomes of the Prespa Agreement. Half of the population believes that more favourable solutions would have been possible in the future and the Prespa Agreement has ended that possibility. On the other hand, 30% of the population considers that the Prespa agreement has exhausted other prospects for compromise between the two countries.

With the Prespa Agreement our country lost the possibility to negotiate a better solution in the future		
%	Greece	North Macedonia
Strongly agree + Somewhat agree	53.5	49
Neither agree, nor disagree	9	15
Strongly disagree + Somewhat disagree	34.5	31

Everybody would call North Macedonia as “Macedonia” if the Prespa Agreement wasn’t signed

Greece: Slightly more than one in two (53.5 percent) of Greek respondents agree with the statement that if it wasn’t for the Prespa Agreement North Macedonia would be called simply Macedonia by everybody, while one in three (34.5 percent) do not agree with that argument. The broad international use of the term ‘Macedonia’, rather than ‘Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia’ was a key argument of those in favour of the Prespa Agreement.

North Macedonia: A significant proportion of respondents (65%) in North Macedonia believe that their country would have still been called Macedonia by the global public if hypothetically the Prespa Agreement wasn’t signed.

If the Prespa agreement wasn’t signed, everybody would have call North Macedonia as Macedonia;		
%	Greece	North Macedonia
Strongly agree + Somewhat agree	53.5	65
Neither agree, nor disagree	6.5	11
Strongly disagree + Somewhat disagree	37.5	20

What should the governments in Greece and North Macedonia do with the Prespa Agreement

Greece: A large majority of the Greek respondents would like their government to either abolish (16 percent) or revise (43 percent) the Prespa Agreement. Only 36.5 percent would like to see the Greek government to implement the agreement. When in opposition, the current ruling party implied that it would make efforts to amend the agreement in accordance with what the party saw as its deficiencies, but has since accepted the path of implementing the deal. The majority of 43 percent, thus, supports the policy path that was preferred by the main political force that opposed the agreement.

North Macedonia: The Macedonian public is clearly divided over the future of the Prespa agreement. An equal distribution of attitudes (30%) is attached to future expectations from the government either to abolish, to revise or to apply the Prespa Agreement. The rejectionist attitudes are overwhelmingly shared by ethnic Macedonians, while the majority of the ethnic Albanians are in favour of the implementation of the Prespa Agreement as it is.

In your opinion which of the following directions should be undertaken by the current government?		
%	Greece	North Macedonia
To abolish the Prespa Agreement	16	30
To revise the Prespa Agreement	43	32
To implement the Prespa Agreement	36.5	30

Main reasons for the signing of the Prespa Agreement

Greece: When asked to identify the main reason behind the signing of the Prespa Agreement, close to one in two (45 percent) of Greek respondents consider that it was a result of imposition from foreign powers, while one in four (23 percent) believe that the government of the time signed the agreement in exchange for achieving favourable terms in Greece's bailout agreements. About one in four respondents associate the decision to reach the agreement with foreign policy benefits for Greece (13 percent) or to the view that the conditions for the settlement of the dispute had matured (13.5 percent).

North Macedonia: In North Macedonia, more than 40% of the respondents acknowledge the external pressures from foreign political actors as the key factor for the settlement of the name dispute and the signing of the Prespa Agreement. 3 out of 10 respondents also attach value to the country's foreign policy. Interestingly, economic expectations don't play a significant role in attitude formation regarding this question.

Role of foreign actors in the name dispute

Greece: The vast majority of Greek respondents consider the involvement of foreign actors in the name dispute as favoring either North Macedonia or both countries; only a small fraction of respondents consider that foreign involvement benefited Greece (highest: Russia with 11.5 percent). More specifically, 45.5 percent of Greek respondents consider that Germany benefited North Macedonia, 35 percent think the same for the EU, 34 percent for NATO, 33 percent for the United States, 30 percent Russia.

North Macedonia: In North Macedonia, a similar pattern of perceptions is detected in regards to the involvement of specific external actors in the facilitation of the resolution of the name dispute. More than a third of the Macedonian respondents believe that the involvement of three of the key external actors, the EU, USA and Germany have benefited Greece. Roughly the same amount of respondents perceive the involvement of the EU, USA and Germany as beneficial for both North Macedonia and Greece. On the other hand, only around 10% of the population believes that EU's and USA's involvement in the resolution of the name dispute has been beneficial for North Macedonia. However, Germany's efforts have been more positively assessed, as almost 20% of respondents believe that German involvement has been more beneficial for North Macedonia rather than Greece.

Concluding remarks

Three years have passed since the signing of the Prespa Agreement which has effectively ended the name dispute between Greece and North Macedonia which has strained the bilateral relations between the two neighbors for decades. Yet, the implications from the Prespa Agreement are still a tough pill to swallow for many citizens of North Macedonia and Greece. The publics in both states remain divided over the prospects of the Prespa Agreement and the effects that it has had on the political and societal life in their respective countries. While many citizens in both countries acknowledge the benefits from the resolution of the name dispute, large swaths of the population have rejectionist views of the Prespa agreement.

However, as this report has shown, there are many instances where both publics share similar (in some cases almost identical) perceptions on the way forward. Majority of citizens in both countries have recognized the importance of the name dispute and have accepted that its resolution has been a compromise that had to be made. Significant proportions of Greek and Macedonian publics support the notion that the Prespa agreement has strengthened peace and

stability in the region, although they disagree about who benefitted from diplomatic activity of international brokers that facilitated the agreement.

Methodology disclaimer:

In Greece, the cross-sectional survey was conducted by the Public Opinion Research Unit at the University of Macedonia Research Institute. The survey was conducted between 18-25 May 2021 on a sample of 1056 respondents, with nationwide coverage.

In North Macedonia, the cross-sectional survey was conducted by the Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis" - Skopje. The survey was conducted between 14-28 May 2021 on a sample of 1000 respondents, with nationwide coverage.