



The Greek-Macedonian name agreement - Promoting Reconciliation in the Western Balkans

Erwan Fouéré

With the formal ratification by the Greek Parliament last Friday of the agreement to resolve the name dispute between Macedonia and Greece, a dark cloud has been lifted, enabling the hitherto fractious relations between these two neighbouring countries to enter into a new and hopefully more promising phase. The Macedonian Parliament also ratified the agreement earlier in the month.

Perhaps the most impressive aspect of this agreement has been the courage shown by two leaders determined to escape once and for all from the “vicious cycle of nationalism”, to quote Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, in a region which continues to be marked by nationalist rhetoric, deep rooted prejudices and bilateral disputes. His counterpart, Zoran Zaev, understood that without a resolution to this long standing dispute with its neighbour, Macedonia would have no hope of ever achieving its foreign policy aspirations of NATO membership and accession to the EU.

Within six months from their first bilateral meeting in the margins of the 2018 Davos World Economic Forum, an agreement was drawn up and signed on 16 June on the shores of Lake Prespa, which straddles both countries. By expediting the process, Macedonia was aiming for a green light from the European Council, meeting later that month, for the formal opening of EU accession negotiations, a decision unfortunately postponed to June 2019.

The referendum on the agreement organised by the government in Macedonia on 30 September was preceded by a campaign which did little to promote a national consensus over the terms of the agreement, and left the government open to criticism for its lack of transparency in conveying the content of the agreement, the full text of which was not circulated widely. The very low turnout (less than 40%, of which the overwhelming majority voted in favour), due both to the boycott by the main opposition VMRO-DPMNE party and to a poorly organised campaign, added to tensions in an already deeply divided country with views for and against following traditional party lines.

Erwan Fouéré is Associate Senior Research Fellow in the Europe in the World research unit at CEPS.

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In accordance with the terms of the agreement which “shall remain in force for an indefinite period of time and are irrevocable”, Macedonia will now be called “Republic of North Macedonia”, and will have 5 years to change all identity papers, car registration plates, etc. Greece will lift its hitherto imposed veto and allow Macedonia to move forward towards NATO and the EU. Procedures for NATO membership require ratification of Macedonia’s application by all member states and are expected to be completed within a year, although Macedonia is already expected to have a seat at the table once the provisional accession protocol is signed (probably next week) and ratified by Greece. While Russia has made clear its disapproval of Macedonia’s NATO membership, there is no doubt that this membership will give Macedonia extra security guarantees in a region which remains fragile.

For both leaders, the risks in concluding this deal are immense, as witnessed by the large demonstrations that took place over the past weeks in Greece and physical threats directed against the MPs who voted in favour of the agreement. Prime Minister Tsipras narrowly survived a vote of no confidence prior to the ratification, following the resignation of his junior coalition partner. The leader of the main opposition party New Democracy has already made clear his rejection of the agreement. With elections scheduled for later this year, there is every possibility that the current Tsipras government could be voted out of office.

The Macedonian Prime Minister meanwhile is already under heavy criticism for alleged amnesty deals to win over MPs from the main opposition VMRO-DPMNE party in order to secure sufficient votes in Parliament, with many of them being under investigation for misdeeds during the previous government led by the former Prime Minister and absconded felon Nikola Gruevski. The government’s action to push through Parliament an amendment to the Penal Code to facilitate the alleged amnesty arrangements has further tarnished the image of the Prime Minister and undermined the government’s commitment to restoring the rule of law and independence of the judiciary. These actions were roundly condemned by civil society organisations who felt betrayed that the support they had given for the removal of the discredited Gruevski regime and the election of a new government under the slogan “no peace without justice” was not being respected.

As in all dispute settlements, the debate over the price to be paid for a deal bringing this dispute to an end will never be resolved one way or the other. The critical test will be whether the settlement ultimately contributes to reconciliation and building mutual trust between both countries, and allows Macedonia to achieve its foreign policy goals. This will depend on the level of commitment from both governments in ensuring that the implementation of the agreement is done on the basis of respect, shared values and equality, words which unfortunately are absent from the text of the agreement itself. The agreement goes into considerable detail on what Macedonia is expected to do in relation to “existing monuments, public buildings and infrastructure” which refer in any way to Hellenic history and civilization, and makes a clear distinction between the “Macedonian” or “Slavic” culture and the “Hellenic” culture. It also states that the agreement will be guided by the principles of “democracy, fundamental freedoms, respect for human rights and dignity”, etc., in accordance with the relevant UN, OSCE and Council of Europe Conventions. It should not be forgotten however that

Greece is not a party to those Council of Europe texts relating to rights of minorities, recognising only the Muslim minority under the 1923 Lausanne Treaty. Greece has furthermore been the subject of criticism from the UN for its treatment of minorities.

Meanwhile despite valiant efforts to catch up on lost time, the Zaev government is in danger of not delivering all the reforms (judicial reform, fight against corruption including convictions for high level crime, as well as reforms in public administration and intelligence and security services) that were set out by the June 2018 European Council, an unfortunate consequence of the focus on resolving the name dispute above all other equally urgent priorities. This raises fundamental questions on the fairness of the EU's 'conditionality' principle for accession of countries from the Western Balkan region, particularly if in the case of Macedonia delays in the reforms are used by some member states to jeopardise the country's chances of receiving the green light to open accession negotiations this year.

For now, both governments can be rightly satisfied that they have taken a giant leap forward that will hopefully herald a new awakening throughout the Western Balkans on what can be achieved through compromise and dialogue. It might even inspire the Kosovo and Serb leaders to resolve their equally fractious relationship.