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# DEMOCRACY AS COLLATERAL DAMAGE

## IMPLEMENTING THE PRESPA AGREEMENT ON MACEDONIA

Djordje Vukadinović

AS THE reader will soon see, the chronology listed below almost speaks for itself. Little to no interpretation is required. Like some X-ray or scanner image, it does not even require examination by some particularly good and overly intelligent radiologist—it only needs to be observed with care and dispassion.

Here is the chronology:

*June 17<sup>th</sup>, 2018* – The prime ministers of Greece and Macedonia, Alexis Tsipras and Zoran Zaev, respectively, sign the Prespa Agreement, which resolves the many decades of conflict between the two countries and which, among other things, involves a change to the name of Macedonia (“The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia,” FYROM) to “the Republic of North Macedonia.”

*July 12<sup>th</sup>, 2018* – NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg submitted an invitation to Zaev for North Macedonia to join NATO.

*July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2018* – the EU’s Commissioner for Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations Johannes Hahn, speaking in Skopje: “A successful referendum on the name will show the maturity of your country and open the way for the launch of negotiations with the EU and NATO.”

*August 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2018* – Zaev discusses a referendum with German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Merkel says: “Germany supports the deal between Macedonia and Greece on the resolving of the long-standing dispute that was the main obstacle to Macedonia’s membership in the EU and NATO.”

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*Don't you North me! Flyers calling for a boycott of the name change referendum*

*September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2018* – In a video message to the citizens of Macedonia, Stoltenberg says: “the doors of NATO are open. Your future is in your hands; we await you!”

*September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2018* – A referendum is held in which Macedonia’s citizens are asked to respond to the question “Are you in favor of EU and NATO membership, along with acceptance of the agreement on the country’s name between Macedonia and Greece?” The State Election Commission announces that the referendum was unsuccessful, due to the fact that only 36 percent of registered voters participated—far below the legally

required 50 percent threshold. Hahn: “I expect Macedonian leaders to respect the decision of citizens and implement the agreement with Greece.” Zaev: “The referendum succeeded. Macedonia will become a member of the EU and NATO.”

*October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2018* – Zaev: “All MPs have an historic duty on behalf of the citizens to secure Macedonia’s route to stability and economic progress—and that is the route to NATO and the EU, and we get there via the Prespa Agreement.”

*October 19<sup>th</sup>, 2018* – The Assembly of the Republic of Macedonia (“Sobranie”) launches the process of amending

the constitution. The ruling coalition manages to secure the minimum two-thirds majority (80 MPs) required to launch the procedure to change the constitutional name of the country to “The Republic of North Macedonia.” Stoltenberg: “The government and political leaders have now to complete the procedure around the agreement on the name and to use this historic opportunity to bring Macedonia into NATO.”

*January 11<sup>th</sup>, 2019* – The Assembly of Macedonia, with a two-thirds majority of 81 votes in favor, adopts the Constitutional Law that concludes the procedure for amending the constitution, with the name of the country officially changed to “The Republic of North Macedonia.” Merkel: “The Prespa Agreement will not only be beneficial to Greece and North Macedonia, but also the whole of Europe.”

*January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2019* – Greece: with a three-vote majority, the Greek parliament ratifies the Prespa Agreement. Stoltenberg: “I welcome the ratifying of the Prespa Agreement. I look forward to North Macedonia’s future entry into NATO.”

The conclusion is inescapable: in a span of seven months, the process that was initiated by the signing of the agreement by Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev and his Greek counterpart, Alexis Tsipras, was concluded and

formalized in both parliaments—despite resistance and the opposition of the majority of public opinion in both countries.

This aforementioned opposition manifested itself directly in Macedonia with the failure of the referendum on changing the country’s name, while in Greece it was expressed through mass demonstrations that followed the Prespa Agreement from its signing to its ratification in the Greek parliament.

I wish to state my position at the onset: the agreement is generally good and was almost optimally, or at least operationally, the only possible way to put an end to a frozen conflict that had gone on for decades. Such an agreement was logical and compromised, in the positive sense of that word—although, objectively speaking, it was still far more painful for the Macedonian side—and represents, in essence, the only possible solution.

But that is not really the point. Whatever I may think; or the reader of this essay may think; or the officials in Brussels may think; or the diplomats whispering in the corridors may think—that is one thing. Quite another is what the citizens of the two countries to which the agreement applies are thinking.

#### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

What then is envisioned by the Prespa Agreement? The Greek-Macedonian dispute was itself from

the outset quite bizarre and difficult to understand for those not sufficiently familiar with the history of the region, and the complicated mutual relations and irrationality that prevail there.

Following the collapse of Yugoslavia, the six republics that were its constituent parts gained international sovereignty and continued their existence as independent states. Macedonia, as one of them, separated itself in the quickest and most painless manner of them all (it was practically the only republic to do so without war);

yet, it somehow unexpectedly entered into conflict with its southern neighbor, which disputed its right to its name.

The relevant background is as follows. During the time of the two Balkan Wars (1912, 1913) and following the expulsion of the Ottoman Empire from almost all of continental Europe, the regional territory known historically as “Macedonia” was divided between Serbia (later Yugoslavia), Greece, and Bulgaria. After World War II, the Serbian part (“Vardar Macedonia”) became a separate republic within Yugoslavia, and over the course of half a century constructed a kind of “pan-Macedonian” national identity,

as a countermeasure to the assimilation aspirations of its “big”—at least in Balkan terms—neighbors to the south, east, and north.

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Neither Greece nor Bulgaria (albeit for differing reasons) looked favorably on the establishment of this new Macedonian identity (surprisingly, Serbia’s communist leaders did not interfere or question this very much, although some in Belgrade circles did object to the establishment of the “Macedonian Orthodox Church”), but

that was not a major problem as long as “Skopje” was under the umbrella of Yugoslavia.

The situation escalated following independence, when Greece vigorously refused to recognize the new state under its constitutional name (“Republic of Macedonia”), which resulted in it being admitted into the UN and all other international organizations under the provisional and rather degrading name of “The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” (FYROM). Greece also blocked, and also from the onset, the path of the “Republic of Skopje” towards the European Union and NATO.

Here, in a real sense, Athens demonstrated political force bordering on arrogance, but it cannot be said that at least part of the Greek arguments and fears were not without at least some merit. Greece's northern province, with the country's second largest city of Thessaloniki as its regional center, and a large number of sacred archaeological remains and toponyms dating back to ancient times (including the ancient capital of Pella, birthplace of both Philip II of Macedon and Alexander the Great), is also called "Macedonia."

And to make matters even worse, partly out of spite as a response to Greek pressure, and partly in search of "deeper" and pre-Slavic historical roots of the newly created state and nation, "Skopje" started increasingly flirting with this ancient heritage and usurping the names and symbols of the famous Macedonian states and dynasties—which, understandably, further irritated the Greeks. And thus passed more than a quarter century.

The Prespa Agreement propels the situation from a deadlock, in the direction of the only possible compromise. Athens will have to unblock

Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration process, and Skopje will have to accept a "geographical addition" to its name as well as accepting to institutionally abandon its antique phantasmagoria and the accompanying pretense of "continuity" with Philip and Alexander of Macedonia. The agreement explicitly forbids "North Macedonia" from making any kind of claim to these two famous "ancestors," as well as using in any form the famous symbol of the "Sun of Vergina" (which in the years following independence was even displayed on the flag of the new country).

Viewed by someone looking from the outside, this probably does not appear particularly terrible, but it is not at all straightforward when viewed from the perspective of a citizen of the country in which everything was, for almost three decades, colored in the symbolism of glorifying ancient history and creating continuity with that past. After all, we are talking about a country in which the only airport and main highway are named "Alexander of Macedon"—and where, for example, books on the nation's military history include detailed elaborations of Alexander's campaign into South Asia.

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## ROUTINE COMPLICATIONS

All of this has now, all of a sudden, been washed away. The signposts displaying the name of the highway disappeared overnight, while cranes spent days removing, letter by letter, the name of the great military commander from the Skopje airport. In return, ("North") Macedonians have been "magnanimously" permitted (for "internal purposes") to refer to themselves as they have to date; and they are still able to call the language they use "Macedonian."

Both local and global political actors considered the matter closed with the signing of the Prespa Agreement, and that its implementation and ratification would be a more or less routine issue. However, that was not the case.

Encouraged by praise received from around the world, coupled with the mayhem in which the opposition found itself after the many years of Nikola Gruevski's authoritarian rule, his successor as prime minister decided to confirm the agreement on a name change in a referendum. Zaev's choice was both appropriate and logical, but—as it turned out—was not particularly prudent.

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In the days ahead of the vote, Europe's entire political elite, led by Angela Merkel, was paraded through Skopje. Each stressed acceptance of the agreement as a necessary prerequisite of a Euro-Atlantic future, which was also highlighted in the referendum question itself—a formulation that, in all honesty, struggles to pass even the easiest test of logical and political consistency (see below).

The referendum that was held on September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2018 proved to be a spectacular failure, given that—according to the official figures of the National Electoral Commission—a mere 35.91 percent of total registered voters turned out—that is to say, 666,743 individuals. In response to the referendum question: "Are you in favor of EU and NATO membership, along with the acceptance of the agreement on the country's name between Macedonia and Greece?" 91.46 percent voted in favor (609,813 individuals), while 5.65 percent (37,700 individuals) voted against (invalid ballots totaled 2.89 percent).

Opponents of the Prespa Agreement celebrated in the streets, albeit briefly. After the initial shock abated, Zaev recovered, declaring the referendum to



have been a success (all the while stressing that it had only been “consultative” anyway), and blamed the formal failure on an outdated voter list as well as “Russian meddling.”

It was decided that ratification of the agreement and adoption of the necessary constitutional amendments would be conducted through parliament, which required a two-thirds majority that Zaev, with all his Albanian coalition partners, does not have. But even that did not prove to be an insurmountable obstacle.

While domestic and international publics were still dealing with the fallout from the failure of the referendum, the Zaev government introduced constitutional amendments to the parliamentary procedure and “mysteriously” secured the support of 80 MPs, which coincidentally was precisely the number needed—and, it so happens, eight more than Zaev and his partners have at their disposal in the Sобрание.

The opposition, but also some impartial observers, indicated that this majority was secured through “black-mail, threats, and bribery of opposition MPs”—some of whom were under

investigation, and some of whom came to vote directly from home detention. (In this connection, it should be noted that the Russian Foreign Ministry stated that the “U.S. ambassador was in the parliament building until the end of the

session, which leaves no doubt as to who directed the process.”)

However that may be, European and American officials welcomed the outcome of the vote with delight, as well as the “responsibility” and “wisdom” shown by the Macedonian par-

liamentarians. Similar levels of “wisdom” were also demonstrated by their Greek counterparts a few months later, when the Prespa Agreement was also confirmed in the Greek parliament. It should here be noted that this happened despite the fact that Tsipras’s main coalition partner broke with him just a few days prior to the vote in question and that the Tsipras government did not in fact have a sufficient majority for ratification—in theory. But as is known, a majority was again conjured in some “mysterious” way.

#### WHY NOW?

Why had a deal been struck at this precise time—and what does the case of the Macedonian name show us?

*When the “will of the people” and the “Western system of values” find themselves in conflict over U.S. geopolitical interests, the system of values and will of the people usually draw the short straw.*

The basic parameters of the solution contained in the Prespa Agreement, as well as the options for a new name for Macedonia, have been in circulation for more than a decade and a half. But in order to break the deadlock it was necessary for external and internal factors to align. To be more precise, it was necessary for people to come to power in both Athens and Skopje who were willing to reach a compromise—who were liberal, tolerant, and not burdened by national questions, whilst being popular enough to politically survive an agreement that everyone knew in advance would not be greeted with a salvo of thrilled enthusiasm in either of the two countries—to put it mildly.

Tsipras and Zaev are two such leaders. Although somewhat bolstered by their initial charisma (and Tsipras has behind him a referendum on EU-imposed austerity measures that he had called, and then ignored the result), they still have the essential legitimacy to bring this process to a conclusion. (And what will become of them and their political careers afterwards is another question entirely.)

The key, however, was the external factor. If we turn our attention back to the chronology found at the beginning of the essay, we see that at every critical juncture in this process there was a statement (and/or visit) by NATO Secretary General

Jens Stoltenberg (Angela Merkel was active, too, but she was secondary).

Stoltenberg always appeared at crucial moments: to support, direct, and encourage domestic actors not to deviate from the right path (“I look forward to the future entry of North Macedonia into NATO”). It was evident that there would be no scolding due to ignoring trifling procedures and playing fast and loose with democratic niceties.

A perfectly legitimate question arises as to why the head of a powerful alliance has so much interest in, and commitment to, resolving this dispute at all costs, and thus accelerating the entry of what is—according to almost all parameters—a not very important little Balkan country.

After the global cooling of relations with Moscow, the strategists of the United States and NATO have begun paying more attention to every part of the planet where there is some unresolved conflict, and to determine whether Russia could, perhaps, somehow get involved—or, rather, from where it could be completely squeezed out.

And thus the Balkans and by now the almost forgotten Greek-Macedonian name dispute suddenly became important and interesting. Of course, there was probably similar reasoning in Moscow when they looked at the white parts on

a map of the Balkans showing membership in the Alliance that had existed until recently. And now those white parts are being filled (Montenegro, Macedonia) by Washington and Brussels, hastily and “preventatively.”

In other words, when the dispute over the name of Macedonia was only local and concerned only bilateral relations between two Balkan states, few were interested in the European future of the citizens of Macedonia and how the isolation of the state is unjust and unsustainable. But when this bizarre conflict in the backwater of the Balkans became a global issue, and when it was couched in the context of relations between global powers and a new rivalry with Russia, the dispute was resolved swiftly: a Solomonic solution was found, like two “Alexanders” to together sever this 30-year “Gordian knot” around the name of the Macedonian state.

What I mean to suggest is that this whole thing is primarily about NATO and the foreign policy interests of the United States. Ironically, the EU actually appears more in the role of a lol-

lipop—that is to say, a motivating carrot dangling from an overly long stick that everyone knows might never be bitten—

and which, as an aside, is rapidly losing its attractiveness and magnetizing strength across the Old Continent. But NATO, in contrast to the EU, is real, robust, at the door, and in a hurry. And that is more or less everything when it comes to the Euro-Atlantic integration that Macedonia will see in the foreseeable future.

There might not have been much to object about all of this had the entire process not been implemented with considerable democratic foul plays, which has compromised the entire idea significantly, even

while praising the valuable agreement on Greek-Macedonian reconciliation. In fact, it appears appropriate to note that the reconciliation itself seems practically instrumentalized and placed in the function of NATO integration.

In other words, the trouble is that the implementation of an agreement that, as is constantly insisted, leads Macedonia toward the EU and NATO was secured by means and in a way that

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contradicts directly the democratic principles and system of values that the EU and NATO, supposedly—according to their rhetoric and self-understanding—champion. In other words, once again it has been shown that when the “will of the people” and the “Western system of values” find themselves in conflict over U.S. geopolitical interests, the system of values and will of the people usually draw the short straw.

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## EPILOGUE

As was expected, an epilogue to the process described in this text came when news also emerged that Zoran Zaev and Alexis Tsipras had been officially nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Regardless of the fact that the Nobel Committee often knows how to surprise with its decisions, I am pretty certain that this duo will receive the prize.

And it will not be undeserved. When all is said and done, the Nobel Prize is awarded for peace, not for democracy. And Zaev and Tsipras certainly contributed to peace—or at least to regional stabilization under the umbrella of NATO. However, as can be seen from this reconstruction—and regardless of their personal political backgrounds, which in the cases of both is undoubtedly liberal and democratic—they did not particularly stand

out as democrats during the process of implementing the Prespa Agreement.

Even under the assumption that the ultimate goal—namely Greek-Macedonian reconciliation, but also the removal of obstacles hindering Macedonia’s entry into NATO (by no means one and the same thing)—may have been just, the means by which it was (or, perhaps more accurately they were) achieved, definitely was not.

And so we come to the fact that Zaev’s and Tsipras’s Western political mentors not only did not find fault with them, but rather, on the contrary, constantly encouraged and urged them to violate democratic procedures and good parliamentary practice in order to accelerate and complete the process.

Whether it was a rational decision, and the extent to which it was a prudent one, is something we will see relatively quickly. If, however, there are no other difficult ramifications—i.e. if the arrangement is maintained and (North) Macedonia does not collapse into internal conflict, but rather develops into a relatively prosperous society—the democratic deficit shown during the process of implementing the Prespa Agreement will, for all actors, come to be seen as much more than just an acceptable level of collateral damage. ●