

Macedonia name dispute: Problem solved?



An agreement has been reached in the long-running name dispute between Greece and Macedonia. [Thimios Tzallas](#) writes that although the agreement is still subject to approval by the parliaments of both countries, Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev has sent a strong message to Brussels in advancing the country's case for EU membership.

The long-running disagreement over what to call 'the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia' (FYROM) has been an entirely insignificant one. The country has co-existed harmoniously with its neighbour Greece for a quarter of a century, and no territorial or national minority conflict has clouded their relations. The issue of what to call the country has also been resolved in practice: the whole world refers to it as 'Macedonia' and will continue to do so regardless of the new name (Republic of North Macedonia) contained in the new agreement.

But despite this, in 2017, just twelve days after being sworn in, Nikola Dimitrov, FYROM's Minister of Foreign Affairs, went to Greece and [in a TV interview](#) told the Greek public that the disagreement about the name is "his country's greatest problem". It is not. In 2015, fourteen armed men and eight policemen [were killed at Kumanovo](#), near FYROM's border with Kosovo. The incident shook public opinion in the country, re-igniting memories of 2001, when it stood at the brink of civil war on the issue of the rights of the Albanian minority.

In 2017, Zoran Zaev, then leader of the opposition and currently Prime Minister, [was physically attacked in Parliament](#) because he dared voice his consent to the election of an Albanian MP as Speaker. Political tensions are currently at a high point: the previous government put 20,000 citizens under surveillance in its efforts to exert control over judicial authorities, the state administration and its political opponents. Officials who investigated cases of corruption in the public sector [had to enter special protection programmes](#) because their lives were in danger. These are the country's real problems, not the way in which the name of the country will be written in the EU's future publications, an issue in which only Greece is interested.

Why then did Dimitrov consider these issues less important than a disagreement of a merely symbolic nature? The answer lies in a recent statement by Johannes Hahn. The Austrian commissioner, responsible for EU enlargement in the Western Balkans, likened the process of accession of the candidate Balkan states to a sailing race. The six countries are at different stages of the course, and, depending on their performance in establishing rule of law and resolving national disputes, they will improve or worsen their ranking.

The European Union does not want to end up with countries which upon reaching their destination will create difficulties for those who are still battling the waves. For example, Brussels does not want Serbia (now negotiating its accession) blocking discussions with Kosovo, which as yet has not even been recognised as a candidate country. The Serbs have themselves been the victims of such practices, when [Croatia blocked their negotiations with the EU](#) by invoking the rights of the Croatian minority in Serbia. Greece is presently doing exactly the same thing in obstructing FYROM's accession not only to the EU, but also to NATO.

In 2015 in Vienna, [the six candidate countries made a commitment to avoid obstructing the accession course of their neighbours](#). No undertaking in principle operates as effectively as bilateral treaties that resolve problems directly instead of suppressing them temporarily, only for the countries involved to encounter them again later on. In the Balkans, it is not only national disagreements that are suppressed, but also the treaties that are meant to regulate them. Some are never ratified by national parliaments, fearing the recurrence of [events like those that happened recently in Montenegro](#) upon its efforts to resolve a border dispute with Kosovo. The ratification of a similar treaty between Bosnia and Croatia is pending since 1999.

The new agreement on the naming dispute is under a very similar threat. It will now have to be sent to both parliaments for ratification. Hours after the two neighbours declared they had reached their historic settlement, the Greek opposition [called a no-confidence vote](#) over the agreement, whilst Macedonian President Gorge Ivanov walked out of a meeting with Zaev declaring that he will not sign "[its disastrous text](#)". The new deal might just be another case where "[Balkan states are satisfied with a less formalised solution where the agreement falls short of ratification but is still implemented](#)".

Either way, Prime Minister Zaev has managed to send a strong message to Brussels. He is making gestures of goodwill towards Greece, such as removing statues of Alexander the Great, whom his predecessor, the nationalist politician Nikola Gruevski, re-invented as the forefather of the country. Zaev has also allied himself with the Albanian MPs, recognising the need for peaceful co-existence between the two communities and inciting the wrath of Russia, which accuses the EU “of imposing a pro-Albanian government at Skopje”. The economy is now showing signs of recovery, with foreign investment [more than doubling in the first four months of 2018](#).

Under Zaev’s leadership, the country is meeting all the requirements demanded by Brussels: forging a spectacular, rather than secretive, resolution to the bilateral crisis, reigning-in rampant nationalism, limiting Russian influence, and establishing a competitive economy. If Zaev is still adrift at sea, then the Greeks are helping him make sail and reach EU membership, the same harbour that they themselves reached back in the 1980s. At that time Greece had [only just transitioned to democracy](#) and had seen a [military invasion of Cyprus by Turkey](#). If the Greeks had come across a Balkan nation negatively disposed to their accession, they might still be adrift. A reminder to everyone that the historic patterns of Balkan states, despite their differences, remain similar.

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