
The Long Battle for a Name: Current State of the Issue and Future Prospects

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Abstract. The dispute between Greece and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) regarding the official name of the state is already twenty-five years old. Despite continued attempts at rapprochement and mediation, the conflict remains stagnant. This article tries to analyze the state of the issue from different points of view –political, economic, historical-social and linguistic– in an attempt to define what are the current difficulties that prevent reaching an agreement in the near future.

Keywords: Macedonia, name, Greece, FYROM, Skopje 2014

1. Introduction

During the European Basketball Championship held in 2015 (Eurobasket 2015), luck, chance or fate wanted the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) and Greece to come face to face in the first qualifying round. Greece comfortably won this match by 20 points (65-85), as reflected in both the specialized and general media. But how was it reflected? The vast majority of newspapers and sports websites echoed the result under the formula "Macedonia 65 - Greece

85".¹ Some, at the very least, preferred to use the term "FYR Macedonia".² The International Basketball Federation, organizer of the Eurobasket, identified each participating country by its official name in English, followed by an official three letters abbreviation in parentheses, e.g. Spain (ESP), Greece (GRE), etc. But when the Republic of Macedonia is on the list, we find this participant officially identified as MKD (MKD).

We have chosen basketball, as we could have done with another sport, or with the crisis of refugees from Syria and other areas of conflict. The situation described serves to illustrate the huge confusion surrounding a conflict which, under the label of "provisional", lasts for more than 20 years. It would not be so serious if it were only a misunderstanding about a name that two states use differently. For example, the fact that the Greeks refer to Istanbul as "Constantinople" has only a symbolic meaning. Similarly, the deplorable and yet widespread use of the term "Skopia" as a reference to the whole state by broad sectors of Greek society occurs not only on a colloquial level, but on the journalistic and even academic. This would be no more than a mere anecdote if this conflict regarding the official name of the republic did not lead to political, economic, social, and even ethnic consequences, which, to this day, prevent the normal development of this state, both internationally and within its fragile internal balance.

Not even the fact that the vast majority of UN member countries, including four of the five permanent members of the Security Council (Russia, China, the United States and the United Kingdom), 18 of the 28 EU member states, and all the states of the Balkan region (except Greece), recognize the Republic of Macedonia by its constitutional name, at least in their bilateral relations, contributes once and for all to an end to this dispute.

Meanwhile, the Greek veto on the entry of the Republic of Macedonia into NATO and, above all, into the EU, endangers the country's economic development and fragile ethnic balance. At the

¹ See, among others: www.acb.com; www.eurosport.org; www.gazetta.it; www.lequipe.fr

² e.g.: www.scoresway.com and www.live-result.com.

same time, ultranationalist sentiment and the rejection of the EU, and, in general, the Western countries, grow in large sections of the population.

It is not our intention here to chronicle the origin of the problem and its development over the last 25 years,³ but to try to analyze the current situation and future prospects. To do this, we will approach this conflict from the political, economic, historical and social point of view, and, finally, from its linguistic aspect, which is, in the end, is what, in the current situation, is marking the limits of this dispute.

2. Political Approach

To go straight to the heart of the problem, Greece's veto in both NATO and the EU is a definitive weapon in the hands of the Athens government. Any other consideration in this approach is absolutely secondary. While the current or future Greek governments are willing to exercise their right to veto the access of the Republic of Macedonia to international organizations, the problem will remain *ad eternum* not solved.

Nea Demokratia, PASOK and now Syriza, have held a monolithic position in this respect. In short, for Athens it is not a problem of the government, but of the state.

It could have been hoped that this approach would have changed with the coming to power of the Syriza government, which did not have to feel tied to the approaches of the previous governments of the traditional parties. After all, Syriza was born and was able to win the elections in order to break with the way of governing in all aspects of life of Greece. However, silence, and, therefore, continuity with respect to the conflict of the name of *the fraternal neighbour of the North*,⁴ keeps the situation open and without the prospect of a solution in the medium term.

³ For a complete account of the development of this conflict since its inception see Tziampiris, A. 2012: 153-171.

⁴ Statement by the Greek Minister for Foreign Affairs, Kotziá, at the annual meeting of ambassadors held in Skopje on 25 August 2016. <http://www.mfa.gr>.

When asking in Syriza's political and academic circles about this issue, the answers revolve around two axes: the current serious economic crisis is not the time to remove this issue, and, secondly, dependence on the junior partner of government, the Independent Greeks (ANEL), who defend a position radically opposed to any concession (even disallowing the possibility of a compound name containing the word "Macedonia"), makes a potential change of position impossible –a red line which, if crossed, would endanger the coalition government. In addition, we can distinguish within the Greek left as a whole –Syriza, Popular Unity and even Antarsya– the existence of two distant political positions with respect to this subject. The majority, or at least the ones that impose their approach, are the *Aristeri Patriotes* (patriots of the left) who defend positions very close to those of Nea Demokratia and PASOK, that is to say, the acceptance of the term Macedonia preceded by a modifier (North, New, Upper, etc.) in the official name of the state, but on condition that it is *erga omnes*, not only for bilateral purposes. In front of this group, there is another sector called the *Ethnomidenistés*, a term that literally means "Zero Nationalism", and which advocates allowing the country to use its constitutional name of "Republic of Macedonia". This position is very strong among the youngest militants – for example, the Youth of Syriza.

Regarding the first argument of "it is not the right time", it should be noted that the silence of Syriza predates its arrival to the government. In the electoral programs of the various cycles over the last few years, the problem is dispatched with generic phrases. Thus, in SYRIZA's 40-point program of May 2012,⁵ in section 10, *An independent foreign policy committed to the promotion of peace*, we can read: "Furthermore, on the basis of international law and the principle of peaceful conflict resolution, we will continue to work in Greek-Turkish relations, a solution to the problem of FYROM's official name, and the specification of Greece's Exclusive Economic Zone". When the first SYRIZA congress as a party was held in July 2013, the silence on the issue was even more clamorous. In the section of the final resolution adopted by the congress dedicated to international

⁵ For a transcript in English, see <http://links.org.au/node/2888>.

politics,⁶ there is only a generic reference to the Balkans: "Greece's position in the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean necessitates the resolution of all open issues of foreign policy on the basis of law and peace, to the benefit of the common interests of the peoples in the area". In that same section, however, the problem of Cyprus and that of the relations with Turkey were singled out. Relations with the Republic of Macedonia did not deserve even a mention for a party that reaches the Greek political stage with the main goal of doing things differently than traditional parties. Concerning the second argument regarding the fear of a possible rupture of the electoral coalition that would lead to the call for early elections, it does not seem very likely that ANEL would risk losing its privileged position within the government and face an early call for elections that could reduce this party to insignificance or even to extra-parliamentary status.

However, Syriza's government has launched an ambitious policy of approaching the Skopje government through so-called Confidence-Building Measures, following an agreement between the two foreign ministers in June 2015. Since then, almost every two months, high-level bilateral meetings have taken place on concrete issues of collaboration on a wide range of topics: energy, with the approval of the construction of an oil pipeline and a gas pipeline between Thessaloniki and Skopje; police collaboration agreements in the fight against organized crime; university degrees; tourism; opening of new border crossings; renewal of rail traffic; and, the reopening of the Florina-Bitola railway line. It is clear that, above all other considerations, the governments of both countries give priority to the fact that both states are doomed and need each other, to the extent of their capabilities, in order to develop: in the case of Greece, its regional policy as a Balkan power; and, in the case of the Republic of Macedonia, its need to rely on its neighbour to the south so as to secure itself as a state.

On the other side of the front, the government of the Macedonian Internal Revolutionary Organization (VMRO), in power for the last 11 years, has had a position very similar to that of the various Greek governments, deliberately allowing that the name dispute become

⁶ "Political Resolution of the First Congress of Syriza", July 2013.

entrenched, understanding, in this case with some reason, that time plays in its favour. While economic relations with Greece, as we will see in the next section, have been, and are, very fluid, the Skopje government has not hesitated to intensify its ultranationalist campaign, mainly by trying to build a national identity based on an alleged inheritance of the glorious past of Alexander the Great. This position has been useful, fundamentally, to maintain within the party the ultranationalist sectors, or simply the extreme right, that in other states of the region have their own organizations differentiated from the traditional conservative parties. Thus, VMRO, despite continued corruption and its authoritarian drift, remains a strong electoral force, as demonstrated by the recent elections held on December 11, 2016, in which it was the most voted for force. But the support of the ultranationalists has a price that seems that the VMRO, concretely, its undisputed leader Gruevski, is paying without perceptible fear. While the government maintains a fluid channel of understanding and collaboration with Athens through the aforementioned Confidence-Building Measures, it launched, at the same time, an indefinable project of "antiquation" of the capital, through the project *Skopje 2014*, which consisted of transforming the appearance of the city by building new buildings in an unspeakable neoclassical style, covering the facades of old buildings in the same style, and installing dozens of statues of all sizes and trends. These statues represent characters from all ages of the history of Macedonia, but with special emphasis on those that refer to the Hellenistic period, with an equestrian statue of Alexander Magno of 22 meters in height (an at the cost of 8 million dollars), and another, reaching 29 meters, of his father, Philip, located just on the other side of the wonderful 15th century Stone Bridge, built in the Ottoman period on the foundations of a Roman bridge, which separates the city centre from the Bazaar neighbourhood, now mostly populated by ethnic Albanians.⁷ The planned installation of a gigantic Ferris wheel, larger than the London Eye, is expected to cost \$20 million.⁸

⁷ This author confesses his inability to faithfully define with words what this monstrous project of the transformation of the city is about. Only images can help to understand it. See, for example: Skopje 2014, "Let them eat Alexander the great statue", Foreign Policy.

⁸ For more information on the cost of *Skopje 2014* see: "Skopje 2014 uncovered".

It is worth recalling, finally, that the city of Skopje was almost completely destroyed by an earthquake with magnitude 6.9° on 26 July 1963. The reconstruction of the city was the result of a gigantic international solidarity movement, led by the UN, the United States and the Soviet Union, and implemented by the government of Tito in a transparent and exemplary manner, through an international competition that was won by the Japanese architect Kenzo Tange, who had already worked in Hiroshima, and who proposed a reconstruction based on the use of bare concrete exteriors within the style of the so-called "Brutalist Architecture".⁹ The work of the Japanese architect was acclaimed internationally for its functionality, cost and innovative character. Today, that Skopje is about to disappear crushed by a costly project (to date almost \$670 million) designed to satisfy certain political positions, despite the opposition or indifference of the majority of the population. There are also complaints about the habitability and health conditions of the new buildings, which have serious defects in ventilation, insulation, space distribution, etc.

Moreover, the *Skopje 2014* Project also has a direct bearing on the state name dispute case on the other side of the border. This process of "antiquation" is seen from the most Greek nationalist positions as the test of latent irredentism in the positions of the government of Skopje. And it must be said that, at least, this architectural breeding does not help at all to solve the problem. It is doubtful to say that a possible change in the government of the republic could contribute to changing this nationalist course. At the time of the writing of this article, the uncertainty remains for the near future of the Republic of Macedonia. The results of the legislative elections, held on December 11, 2016, after two postponements during the same year, have left the country in a situation in which the two major parties are in a technical tie. The vote of the Albanian minority, so far in the hands of the two traditional parties, the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) and the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA) has now been shared among four political formations, with the emergence of two new

⁹ For a more detailed description see: "Communist Architecture of Skopje, Macedonia – A Brutal, Modern, Cosmic, Era".

parties: BESA Movement, which has become the favourite of the urban and young Albanian sectors; and, the Albanian Alliance. The attitude of these parties will depend not only on who, but how, the country will govern in the coming years. The extent to which a government of the Socialists, who have been in the opposition for the last 11 years, can change the course of the country is something that should be analyzed in the wide spectrum ranging from hope to scepticism. It remains unknown and difficult to determine to what extent the presence of a weakened VMRO remaining in power means either the end of corruption or the implementation of democratization measures demanded by the populace. At least in the last elections, a certainly hopeful fact emerged. For the first time in the history of this country, two ethnic Albanian MPs have been elected on the lists of one of the major parties, the Socialist Party (SDSM), the long-time heirs of the League of Yugoslav Communists in the Socialist Republic of Macedonia.

In short, the continuity of the Athens veto, which makes the Republic of Macedonia a victim in the eyes of the international community, and the ultranationalist drift of Skopje, which, to a certain extent, serves to justify the Greek position, become two positions that feed off of and justify each other.

3. Economic Approach

Greece is one of the three largest investor countries in the Republic of Macedonia. Not even the precarious situation of the Greek economy has meant a significant reduction of its investment position in the neighbouring country (Nieto, 2014). It is true that, in absolute terms, the figures are certainly modest, but for an economy like Macedonia, Greece is, quantitatively and qualitatively, one of its main partners in the region and found throughout its financial system. At the end of 2015, more than 1,000 Greek companies were registered in the Republic of Macedonia. Of these, 360 were active and 50 were registered during that year. The jewels of this Greek presence are undoubtedly Stopanska Banka, the largest bank in the country, owned by the National Bank of Greece, and OKTA, the oil refining and distribution company, whose majority shareholder is Hellenic

Petroleum. The Greek presence in the banking sector is complemented by the subsidiary in the country of Alpha Bank. Also, Greek companies are very well positioned in sectors such as the textiles, construction, retail supermarket and wine production.

Pragmatism or double standards? Most likely both. As far as economic relations are concerned, it does not seem that the conflict over the name is an obstacle for either party. Greek executives of Macedonian companies sign hundreds of documents daily in which is written "Republic of Macedonia", since the term "FYROM" is not used at all within the country. Although it is true that "identities are not bought with money",¹⁰ it looks quite paradoxical that a substantial part of the economy of the young independent republic is controlled by those who deny the possibility of access to international platforms that could potentially be vital for the development of that very same economy. In any case, regardless of the always questionable moral judgments, the economy is a very solid bridge between the two states, not only by the Greek investments, but by the already existing important role of Thessalonica, and the Greek Macedonia in general, as a point of reference of communications, entry and exit of goods and as a leisure and shopping destination for a growing number of citizens of the Republic of Macedonia.

As we have seen in the previous section, the current government of Syriza has made it very clear not to burn bridges, but rather to lay others strong enough so that Greece does not lose its predominant position in the Balkans. A simple glance at the figures of each country in the region, serves to understand the magnitude of what we are talking about. Let us take as an example the comparison between the countries of the total and *per capita* Gross Domestic Product (GDP), calculated using the Purchasing Power Parity (PPP), estimated for 2016, based on the data obtained until the last quarter of that year. Thus, we find that only Romania at \$441 billion overcomes Greece with \$290 billion in total GDP (PPP); yet is the opposite when comparing GDP per capita, with Greece at \$26,809 GDP (PPP) per

¹⁰ Opinion expressed by Professor Evanthis Hatzivassiliou in a private conversation with the author during the International Scientific meeting "Balkans: historical processes and current challenges (XIX-XXI centuries)" celebrated in Granada on 5-6 November 2015.

capita and Romania with \$23,320 per capita. Slovenia, on the other hand, is the only country with a higher GDP per capita (\$32,027) than Greece. But what we are talking about here is the comparison between the GDP (PPP) figures of Greece and the Republic of Macedonia. By population and extension, it is logical that the overall Greek GDP (PPA) is much higher, compared to the \$30 billion of the little republic. But the difference is much more significant if we look at GDP (PPP) per capita figures, \$26,809 for Greece versus \$14,530 in the Republic of Macedonia, given that this figure has been calculated taking into consideration that the cost of living in the Republic of Macedonia is by far lower than the one in Greece.¹¹

In short, even at such a serious time in the Greek economy, its economic capacity makes it the largest regional power and a privileged interlocutor for the Europeanist aspirations of the countries still waiting for joining the EU. If it is confirmed that Greece has already abandoned the economic recession, its regional power role can only become stronger in the medium term. Identities are not actually bought with money, but the economy can be a determining factor, not the only one of course, to reach a way out of the dispute over the official name of the Republic of Macedonia.

4. Historical and Social Approach

In this confusing battle, both contenders strive to claim the heritage of glorious past times. Basically, in this war of symbols, the "national" identity of the Macedonians of Philip and Alexander plays a priority role. They are an unequivocal part of Hellenism for Athens and the origin of the current Macedonian identity for Skopje. All kinds of archaeological, documentary, and geographical arguments are used to defend one or the other position. The governments of the VMRO, in power in the Republic of Macedonia during the last 11 years, have been especially active in this regard. Apart from the aforementioned *Skopje 2014* Project, the name of the airport and the A1 motorway (now both "Alexander the Great") was changed, as well as the main

¹¹ International Monetary Fund.

square of Skopje and a multitude of other sites throughout the country. Greece counterattacks with the evidence that the main archaeological sites are in Greek Macedonia, Macedonia's participation in the ancient Olympic Games, the presence of Aristotle as responsible for the education of Alexander and a long and endless rosary of arguments and counterarguments on the part of one and the other side.

The most deplorable element of this confrontation is the participation of a good part of the academia of both countries, placed in the service of the nationalistic interests, whose objective is to support the arguments of each state. We thus have witnessed the construction of myths on both sides of the border that have a huge impact on the population as a whole, which very often feels threatened either because its identity is denied or because it is stolen. Historians and political scientists from both sides of the border (Kofos, 1993; Rossos, 2008) and the respective diasporas have put their work in the service of the justification of the respective national positions.

This type of approach seeks to and succeeds in appealing to feelings and emotions. Thus, on 14 February 1992, a demonstration took place in Thessaloniki with the support of all political parties, except the KKE, and with the enthusiastic presence of the Greek Orthodox Church, in which took one million people to the streets (Karakasidou, 2014). Not even the organizers hoped to gather such a large number of people. Any demonstration of a million people, anywhere in the world, is a great event, but if this happens in a country of less than twelve million inhabitants, where almost 10% of the population goes out, we are talking about an event of proportions out of the ordinary. The motto was simple "Macedonia is Greek" shortly thereafter, on March 28, 1992, an excited Konstantinos Karamanlis, then President of the Republic Greece, declared before the television cameras at the airport of Thessalonica that "there is only one Macedonia, and that Macedonia is Greek". This type of act is what has become what we could today call the Greek maximalist position, since it does not coincide with the approaches of the last Greek governments (Karamanlis, Simitis, Papandreu, Tsipras and even Samaras) that would accept the use of the word "Macedonia", in certain circumstances, provided that it is accompanied by a geographical modifier.

To be informed about what citizens think about this issue, we only have the surveys conducted and published in November 2007¹² and February 2008.¹³ Three out of four Greek citizens believed that no concessions should be made and that the word "Macedonia" could not appear in any way in the official name of the state to which most of the street and the media denominated, and still call, "Skopia". Likewise, four out of five agreed that the government should maintain its veto to the accession of the Republic of Macedonia to NATO and the EU until the problem of the name was satisfactorily resolved. Likewise, the rejection of the acceptance of a double name, one for internal use and another for international purposes, was also supported by an overwhelmingly majority. Finally, these surveys show that the rejection of any type of concession is much higher among the residents of Macedonia and Thrace. Although we do not have more recent data, there is not much reason to believe that the opinions held today are very different.

The problem now is how and who can defuse this situation in an atmosphere of economic crisis and amid a boom of ultranationalist positions, represented (but not only) by the Golden Dawn party, which has been firmly implanted in the Greek political landscape. Nea Demokratia and Syriza do not appear to be prepared to assume this risk of incalculable electoral consequences.

Any view expressed publicly against these statements, is considered "unpatriotic", almost a betrayal. There have been cases in which individuals or groups have spoken out against the official attitude towards the Republic of Macedonia. One of the earliest nearly ended in tragedy. The only party to initially detach itself from the maximalist positions was the Communist Party of Greece (KKE). On June 3, 1994, at an election event in Thessaloniki on the occasion of the European elections, three Communist candidates were stabbed by a person who came to the podium pretending that he was going to deliver to the speakers a bouquet of flowers. The attacker was arrested, tried and sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment and in any case justified his action using the KKE's position towards the

¹² Metron Analysis

¹³ Alco. The pulse of society

Republic of Macedonia (Rizopastis, 1996). Another incident related to voices that dissent from the official position is that of Anastasia Karakasidou, Professor of Anthropology at Wellesley College located in the state of Massachusetts in the United States. Professor Karakasidou carried out research in the framework of her PhD dissertation in several towns in Greek Macedonia where she sought proof of the existence of a Slavic minority totally different from the majority Greek population. Her doctoral thesis was published in 1997 (Karakasidou, 1997). A leak to the press of a manuscript of her work resulted in her receiving serious death threats. An extreme right-wing publication, "Stohos" went on to publish the address of her family home in Thessaloniki, as well as the registration of the car she used to travel to the areas of her investigation. Her family, originally from Asia Minor, received all kinds of pressure and, according to some sources, several visits from the secret police. Also, organizations of the Greek Diaspora in the United States joined the attacks on this researcher (Doyle, 1994). More recently, in March 2016, Deputy Minister of Immigration Policy Mouzalás, in an interview with the Skaï television network, referred to the problem of immigrants not being allowed to enter "Macedonia". Despite apologizing publicly, both the opposition and the government partners, ANEL, insistently asked for the resignation or dismissal of the deputy minister. Some media have also dared to disagree with the official position. In this sense it is very interesting the documented work of the collective "Iós" in dismantling the myths that have contributed to form the Greek public opinion on this subject (Iospress).

On the other side of the border, the process is, basically, very similar. The inhabitants of the Republic of Macedonia have to face a process of nation building that the government identifies both with the Hellenistic past and with the struggle for the liberation of Macedonia from the Ottoman yoke in the late nineteenth and early XX centuries. The task of distancing itself from the Bulgarian component is thus set in motion. An arduous task, no doubt, since the ties between the Macedonian nationalist movements of the early twentieth century with the Bulgarian state, were very close (Danforth, 1997). In fact, the governments in Sofia, which have no problem in recognizing the Macedonian state by its constitutional name, does not recognize the existence of a "Macedonian nation" differentiated from the Bulgarian

one. In short, Macedonian and Bulgarian history, language and culture are one and the same thing. For Sofia, the differentiation between "the Bulgarian" and "the Macedonian" is a direct consequence of the historical falsification carried out by the Yugoslav Communist regime (Ivanov, 2008). However, Bulgaria accepts that a majority of the Slav Macedonian population does identify with its historical Bulgarian roots, but demands the recognition of a Bulgarian minority within in the Republic of Macedonia.

Under all of these circumstances, Greek reservations, Hellenistic delusions of the VMRO, Bulgarian positions, and the existence of an important Albanian minority, between 20% and 25% of the total population of the country, the task of building a national identity becomes extremely hard.

The existence of the Albanian minority, which is the majority in some regions, gives rise to major concerns about the stability of the country. Although the 1991 process of secession of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was fundamentally peaceful, the inter-ethnic conflict of 2001 showed that a significant part of the definition of the state was unresolved. The permeable border with Kosovo and, to a lesser extent, the historical ghost of a "Great Albania" constitute a constant threat to the very existence of the Macedonian state. It is interesting to analyze what the Albanian minority wants, which is nothing more than equal rights, official recognition of their language, access to public administration, etc. When asked in September 2013 (Enikos, 2013), for example, about the possibility of adding the geographical modifier "Alta" to the official name of the state, in the country as a whole, 53.6% was against it and 37.5% in favour. But if we disaggregate the vote between the two communities, we see that among the Slav majority the vote against the incorporation of the modifier reached 64.8%, while the favourable vote among the Albanians reached 59.1%. But where perhaps the biggest difference (and the biggest concern) lies is in the very different positions with respect to joining the European Union. While some observers fear that among the Slav majority Europeanism is losing strength to the point that the rejection would

already be close to 50%, among the Albanian minority the desire to join Europe is supported by more than 90%.¹⁴

In this scenario, the outcome of the December 2016 elections adds even more uncertainty. The VMRO campaign was very belligerent against the approaches of the Albanian parties. The peculiar distribution of seats among the six electoral regions, each with twenty MPs, has meant the victory of the Socialist opposition in the region where the majority of the capital is, the victory of the Albanian parties in the region where they are majority, the victory of the VMRO in two regions and a tie between the two major parties in the two remaining remains. In these circumstances, the country's governability rests with the largest Albanian party, the DUI, which has already ruled in coalition with VMRO in recent years. However, that same participation in the government is what explains the loss of ten MPs (from 19 to 9 seats). The message sent seems clear and it seems unlikely that this party will re-embark on a coalition with the VMRO. In any case, one more deputy would still be needed, so that the Albanian parties are compelled to understand each other, in order to try to force a government that is committed to their interests as a national minority.¹⁵

As a counterpoint to such uncertainty, the fact that, as we have explained, for the first time in the history of this young country, one party, that of the SDSM Socialists, has presented interethnic candidacies and two Albanian MPs have been chosen in the lists of this party. Likewise, the SDSM has incorporated intellectuals and social movement activists into a successful attempt to connect with what the citizens asked for.

To speak of the name dispute in these circumstances, it would seem not to have more sense. The Republic of Macedonia is in a fragile political situation where the priority is undoubtedly to achieve a stable government.

¹⁴ Author talks in Skopje with representatives of political parties, activists, university professors and journalists. Without a recent survey in this regard, virtually all agreed that Euroscepticism among the Macedonian majority is constantly increasing, while the support of the Albanian minority remained constant.

¹⁵ Macedonian State Election Comision.

5. Linguistic Approach

The dispute over the official name of the Republic has become a stagnant conflict. When it was first raised, in the early 1990s, all measures adopted were labelled as "provisional", especially the compromise signed by the governments of Athens and Skopje in 1995.¹⁶ Twenty-one years later, provisionality has given way to a *de facto* situation, in which the different actors involved have turned their respective positions into almost definitive ones, so that the possibilities of negotiation are becoming smaller and smaller.

In these circumstances, the linguistic aspect of the problem acquires a protagonism that it did not have fifteen or twenty years ago. For, in the end, a name is governed by the rules of language. Thus, although the fact that the international community accepts the name of the Republic of Macedonia is not strictly a linguistic phenomenon, it may be useful to use its conceptual apparatus to analyze the matter. According to Eugenio Coseriu (1973), the rule that regulates speech "is not established according to criteria of correction and subjective assessment of what is expressed [...] In checking the norm to which we refer, we verify how it is said and not how it should be said [...] The concepts that are opposed to it are normal and abnormal, and not correct and incorrect". According to this, the maintenance over a prolonged period of a linguistic use legitimizes it and tends to make it permanent.

Thus, regardless of any agreement that governments can reach, it seems it would be very difficult for the Greeks to stop referring to the neighbouring country as "Skopia" and its inhabitants as "Skopianí". Similarly, it seems impossible for the nationals of the Republic of Macedonia to stop referring to their country as 'Macedonia' and to themselves as "Macedonians", knowing, moreover, that its position on this matter is reinforced by the fact of the wide international recognition as such.

In short, the linguistic aspect of this dispute has ended up becoming the main problem to reach an agreement. Greek maximalism first, the

¹⁶ Interim Accord between Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

dangerous games by the Skopje governments, especially in the last ten years, of building a national identity from a more than dubious Hellenistic heritage, together with the political and economic instability of both countries, have contributed to the solution to the problem still seeming to be far away. However, it is not a risk to say that the generalization of certain linguistic uses favours the approaches of the Republic of Macedonia in the eyes of the international community.

6. By way of conclusion... (If possible)

In May 2016, I had the opportunity to travel to Athens and Skopje, to try to catch up on the status of the issue on the dispute over the name. In Skopje, from the very first minute I was aware that something much more important was at stake. The democratic future of the state was, no more or less, being decided upon. The elections scheduled for April 2016 had already been postponed and very large sections of the population went out daily on to the street as part of the so-called "Colourful Revolution", which aimed to support the Special Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office, to force the President of the Republic to annul the pardon granted to more than forty politicians accused of serious crimes in the exercise of their positions and, in short, they asked for a new postponement of the elections scheduled for the month of June. In these circumstances, no one seemed to attach too much importance to the dispute over the name, since what was at stake was much more serious.¹⁷

Of the more than fifteen interviews that I conducted, all but one were with interlocutors of the Slav majority or "Ethnic Macedonians", according to the disputed and debatable term by which they call themselves. The remaining interview was the only one I held with a member of the Albanian community, a media management specialist and political activist, who, to my surprise, was the only one who, even in those circumstances in the country, considered it a priority to

¹⁷ For independent and rigorous monitoring of the internal situation in Macedonia, see the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network website, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/>.

solve the problem of the name. My Albanian counterpart went much further in stating that the unstable ethnic balance of the country required the unavoidable incorporation into the EU, for which an overwhelming majority of the Albanian-Albanian community was committed, and that for that very reason the obstacle created by the name dispute had to be removed.

However, I did not find anyone who was willing, not even my Albanian interlocutor, to give up that his national identity be defined exclusively as "Macedonian". Twenty-five years after the declaration of independence, the generation that leads, or intends to lead, the country is increasingly far from the Yugoslav period. The top leaders of the two main parties, Gruevski of the right-wing VMRO and Zaev of the Social Democrat SDSM, were respectively 20 and 17 years old at the time of independence. Bilal Kasami, leader of the new Albanian party BESA Movement, which has broken through in the last elections, was 16 at the time of independence. A large part of the activists who have led the opposition to the VMRO government on the streets are even younger. Although all of them were still born as Yugoslavs, they grew up, were formed in, and began in the labor and political worlds as Macedonians. There is nothing else they can be. They are not the Macedonians of Alexander the Great, not even the Macedonians of Goce Delchev or Dame Gruev, the heroes of the struggle against Ottoman domination, but the Macedonians of 1945, when the republic was created within the federal Yugoslav state.

With the disappearance of Yugoslavia, the Serbs, Croats, Slovenes and Montenegrins had no problem recognizing their own national identity. Problems arose by delimiting the geographical space corresponding to those identities. In the case of Macedonia, the territorial dispute is minimal, the state is perfectly delimited, but the national identity continues to be disputed by the Greeks, the Bulgarians, by Serbian ultranationalist sectors and by the threat of conflict with the large Albanian minority.

In these circumstances, it is not surprising that a significant part of the population feels "protected" by nationalist positions, by national references to both near and distant periods of history, and even by minority but real voices, which go further and do not renounce but rather play with irredentist dreams of "reunification" of what they

consider the usurped Macedonian homeland. The inconclusive result of the parliamentary elections of 2016 may further lengthen the permanent situation of institutional crisis. The decisive role of the Albanian parties in the country's governance could lead to a radicalization of the nationalist approaches of the Macedonian majority. The possibility of new legislative elections in the spring, coinciding with the planned proposition, would help to defer any further initiative to solve the name problem.

In Greece, on the other hand, the political forces that had divided the power until recently, the right-wing Nea Demokratia and the social-democrat PASOK, approached the independence of the neighbour of the north with a maximalist approach: there is only one Macedonia, and this Macedonia Is Greek. What for politicians could be a starting point for negotiation, for the country's public opinion was, and still is, almost a dogma. Although the official position today is to accept a composite name, the condition that there are no double denominations again places the negotiations at a dead end.

However, it seems as impossible a task for the Republic of Macedonia to stop using, even if only for bilateral purposes, its constitutional name, as it would be for Greece to stop using the derogatory metonymy "Skopia". The permanent economic uncertainty in Greece, discourages the government to make decisions that, although they do not cost money, can cost popular support. The argument, however, that the governing coalition with ANEL would be in danger if more flexible positions were to be adopted in the negotiation with the Skopje government, is, as we have already pointed out, more than debatable.

Finally, the disappointing "Enlargement Report" of the European Commission of November 2016, dedicates to the issue of the name dispute only the following sentence: 'Building upon recent progress in implementing confidence-building measures with Greece, decisive steps are needed to solve the issue'. Moreover, it has been announced that the package of measures for enlargement, to be adopted in 2017, has been postponed to the autumn of 2018, so that it will not be in force well into 2019.¹⁸ That represents a real pitcher of cold water for

¹⁸ European Neighbourhood Policy.

the candidate states of the Balkans, and in the case of the Republic of Macedonia, could help to defer any attempt to resolve the already unbearably long battle for the official name of the state.

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