The Macedonian name dispute today: A window of opportunity?
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Workshop Report

SEESOX, University of Oxford

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The following report draws on discussions during the workshop ‘The Macedonian name dispute today: A window of opportunity?’ organised by SEESOX on the 18th of November 2017 at St Antony’s College, University of Oxford. Participants, including historians, political and legal scholars, former diplomats and other experts on the subject, gathered to discuss the issues that divide Athens and Skopje and to explore potential solutions for the future. While the workshop addressed the numerous obstacles to an agreement between Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia/Republic of Macedonia (FYROM/ROM), we focused on the incentives and opportunities for resolution at a period when there seems to be political will on both sides to bridge differences. The workshop aimed to promote mutual understanding and support a fruitful dialogue between the two parties, through concrete proposals towards the resolution of the name dispute. The following report is SEESOX’s interpretation of the discussions during the workshop, which was held under the Chatham House Rule, and does not purport to reflect the views of any of the participants.

1. The significance of momentum

There was a general consensus among participants that, after the change of government in FYROM/ROM a window of opportunity has emerged regarding the resolution of the name issue. There have been a number of bilateral meetings and constructive declarations from the Foreign Ministers of the two sides. Furthermore, 2018 is a non-electoral year for both countries and Bulgaria will be holding the EU Presidency from January to June 2018 and could play a constructive role in the rapprochement following its own signing of the Treaty of Friendship, Good-neighbourliness and Cooperation with FYROM/ROM in July 2017.

While workshop participants agreed that the momentum is critically favourable, they also highlighted that it may be time-limited and therefore that the two governments need to work quickly and rigorously toward a viable solution. One of the risks is the marginal majority of the SDSM (Social Democratic Union of Macedonia) government over the current opposition VMRO-DPMNE (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation-Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity), and its leader Nikola Gruevski’s nationalist agenda, in which the name issue plays a particularly prominent role. The resolution of the name dispute requires a constitutional change in FYROM/ROM, which could be utilised to inflame polarisation and stir up public emotions.

Moreover, in order to achieve a successful negotiation, this new opportunity should not be overburdened by an effort to resolve all aspects related to the name dispute, but

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1 Since we sought to sustain a neutral position on the issue, which was the very focus of the workshop, we make reference to the country by including both names employed by the participants during the discussion. The report will therefore make use of the acronym FYROM/ROM (Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia/Republic of Macedonia) to reflect sensitivities on both sides.
should rather develop a mechanism to resolve the different elements of the dispute through an incremental and gradual process. While questions related to the derivatives of the country name (designation of people, language, etc.) should be part of the discussion, they should not develop into permanent roadblocks. A possible solution might initially be to avoid the derivatives question by following the UK model and the use ‘of [the country]’ to designate belonging in formal contexts, while making it clear that this does not concern what people say and write in their private sphere. Depending on the views of the two sides, this could be proposed as either an interim or a permanent solution so that negotiations can continue on a positive footing.

In the longer term, however, the two governments will need to deal with all substantial issues, not only the issue of the name. Such resolution cannot happen by governmental agreement alone, for the overarching factor in bridging differences and reaching an agreement is to build confidence. While necessary for any negotiations, confidence-building measures are most important for the two countries’ future generations, allowing them to think of each other in a positive manner. The agreement signed in the near future needs to provide a roadmap for such mutual exchanges and discussions.

2. Obstacles and Incentives

In order to facilitate a realistic plan, the two sides need to recognise the obstacles posed by some ‘unproductive’ debates about the history of the region, acknowledge preceding diplomatic failures, build on some of the past successes and avoid chauvinistic and populist politics. The elimination of the obstacles perceived as such by the two societies is necessary, not only for resolving the name issue, but also for helping create good diplomatic relations and stability in the wider region.

It was emphasised during the workshop that the Greek side is mostly concerned with irredentism and the monopolisation of a name which belongs to a whole region. Irredentism seems no longer to relate so much to worries about territorial ambitions, which are in any event not entirely credible to the outside world, but mostly to recurring claims regarding alleged ‘Macedonian minorities’ in Greece and Bulgaria. Nevertheless, irredentism is part of the historical grievances on the Greek side, where historians and diplomats have raised the issue of FYROM/ROM history textbooks promoting irredentism against Greece at school. For instance, textbooks avoid using the terms ‘Greek’ and ‘Bulgarian’ Macedonia. The workshop participants suggested that textbooks should be looked at as part of the confidence-building measures, ideally by setting up commissions comprised of historians and other scholars from both countries, including from the Albanian minority in FYROM/ROM. On the other hand, participants from FYROM/ROM suggested that some references to the dispute on Greek official governmental webpages are needlessly inflammatory and should be reformulated to reflect the current climate of good will. Such initiatives are of great importance in building trust between the two parties’ future citizens and creating the basis for fruitful negotiations.

Also on the point of irredentism, a participant from FYROM/ROM stressed the importance of the 2011 International Court of Justice (ICJ) decision, in favour of his country’s stance, that Greece had violated the Interim Accord of 1995 by vetoing FYROM/ROM’s entry into NATO. As a result, a fundamental obstacle to fruitful negotiations is the lack of trust in a future Greek stance, on the part of FYROM/ROM.
There is suspicion that, even if there were to be an agreement on settling the name issue, Greece would still obstruct FYROM/ROM’s entry to the EU and NATO. However, other participants stressed that the ICJ decision in itself did not facilitate the resolution of the name dispute.

On the process side, workshop participants discussed the prospect of a referendum on an agreement in FYROM/ROM, with all the uncertainties this would bring. There is also a risk that this in turn would trigger a similar referendum in Greece, producing another potential obstacle. Clearly the discussions will take place in the light of public opinion on both sides – but the point of leadership is to take the public with it. For if a referendum were to be lost on one or the other side or both, the situation would be worse than if no agreement had been negotiated in the first place.

Nevertheless, the incentives and possible solutions outweigh the obstacles. One has to recognise the fact that there are political incentives on both sides for resolving the name dispute, given the present opportunity. The current government of FYROM/ROM would benefit from undertaking steps in this direction in order to enable the opening of a path for negotiations to enter the EU and NATO. It is also a positive development that the current FYROM/ROM government has a different view toward the so-called ‘antiqisation’ of the country, pursued by its predecessor. Moreover, the course of action by the Gruevski government alienated many of the country’s intellectuals and was in this sense counterproductive for the previous government. The announcement that the FYROM/ROM government might be willing to change the name of the ‘Alexander the Great’ airport and highway is certainly a good move, which can be exploited by the Greek government to justify its own compromises when the time for negotiations comes.

More broadly, it is in the interest of the Greek government to resolve the name issue, given the potential for instability at its the northern border should the present situation continue. A solution that will satisfy both sides will benefit stability in the wider region. Moreover, ‘solving’ the Macedonian issue would certainly be an excellent legacy for the current government.

In addition, the two countries need to focus on the practical incentives, which can be found in areas of commercial interest. Cooperation in sectors such as energy sustainability, water and air-pollution, and copyright were mentioned. Economic achievements cannot be regarded as a substitute for a solution to the main problem; however, massive Greek investments in the late ‘90s greatly contributed to the improvement of the bilateral relations and, despite the unresolved name issue, today Greece has become one of the biggest investors in FYROM/ROM.

3. Process and negotiation

There was a consensus on the obvious point that, in order to address the ‘Macedonian Name Dispute’, both parties need first to acknowledge each other’s sensitivities and fears through dialogue that will last much beyond this negotiation phase. The negotiations will need to adopt a step-by-step approach.

1– The past. Parties will need to acknowledge and take in the precious lessons from almost twenty-five years of negotiations when much of the ground was covered and alternatives discussed, accepted or rejected. The interim agreement in September 1995
contributed to a gradual rapprochement and normalisation in the two countries’ relations but within limits. It left the name issue unresolved. Still, it should be regarded as a useful instrument to facilitate the everyday life of citizens and economic conditions. Against this backdrop, it is worth remembering that Greece shifted its position between the beginning of the 1990s, when it objected to the inclusion of the word ‘Macedonia’ in the name at all, to the mid-2000s, when it shifted to accepting a composite name containing the word ‘Macedonia’ – a position that it holds to this day, but that may not have been ‘sold’ well to both publics.

2– Power asymmetry. One concern frequently raised by the FYROM/ROM side was that of the power asymmetry in the negotiations, which in turn creates distrust. Greece is regarded as having the ‘upper hand’, in the light of the prior history of veto and the fact that such behaviour could be replicated at various points during FYROM/ROM’s EU accession process. Given this lack of trust, Greek assurances to refrain from such behaviour in an eventual name agreement might not be enough to convince FYROM/ROM. The negotiating strategy outlined below takes this into account.

3– Domestic politics. In general, if a solution is to be found, it is essential that the two governments: seek consensus among political parties in each country; engage in a public campaign of serious and systematic information on the merits of the matter; try as much as possible to counteract the views of those who are either not familiar with the issue or have no wish to resolve it; work continually to consolidate the climate of confidence, not only at governmental, but also at social level; and work to decrease the risk of a serious backlash, which might be created by one or two referenda.

For instance, from the Greek viewpoint, it is imperative for FYROM/ROM to remove irredentist references against Greece in the country’s school history textbooks, which tend to be trumpeted by hardliners whenever the debate re-enters the public sphere. Perceptions of the past affect the will to compromise. Conversely, it was acknowledged that there is a stark lack of reference to the state of FYROM/ROM in Greek history textbooks. A policy of positive discrimination towards FYROM/ROM was proposed, in order to correct the negative representation of the state in the Greek public debate.

4– Transnational dialogue. The two governments ought to encourage as soon as possible the launching of joint projects on topics of common interests (e.g. Prespes lake). Universities from both sides could organise seminars that can put the name dispute in a broader perspective (e.g. regional history under the Ottoman Empire). The governments must be creative in the ways they promote the benefits of cross-national networks, and praise initiatives that can contribute to the fostering of mutual understanding. This could offer a perspective emphasising what unites the two nations, rather than what divides them. If policies that look at the neighbouring country as the ‘Other’ are to be reformulated in the political sphere, such a process needs to be underpinned by the intellectual spheres.

5– Strategy. In terms of concrete negotiating strategy, participants at the workshop suggested the following ideas:

1) Atmospherics and breakthrough:
   a. It is essential to create momentum with a breakthrough step at the beginning, which will give something to politicians on both sides. A
confidence-building period should follow until the two parties reach a final agreement.

b. The initial breakthrough could start with symbolic yet highly political moves on both sides to begin to eliminate provocative language in textbooks, websites and the like, which lend credence to irredentist claims on the Greek side and to anxieties about identity on the FYROM/ROM side. Both countries could agree to eliminate state-sponsored discourse directed against the other side and mutually reaffirm their commitment to sharing the Macedonian name. The creation of joint commissions could signal a long-term commitment on both sides.

2) Agreement on name:
   a. This move would then create the right atmosphere for exploring alternatives that can replace the current provisional name of FYROM with a permanent name. Variations around a composite name with a qualifier, specifically for international use, need to be explored (see part 4 below).
   b. The derivatives of the name could be treated following the UK example as ‘of [the country]’, also for international use.
   c. In terms of public perception, this solution would allow Greece to claim that it has achieved a change of name, while FYROM/ROM could stress the ‘international use component’ and the general unfreezing of its Euro-Atlantic integration.

3) Ratification:
   a. One option for dealing with the lack of trust in FYROM/ROM towards future vetoes by Greece which was discussed, was the one proposed by the European Stability Initiative (ESI) in 2012 – specifically that the name-change be put in the constitution of FYROM/ROM only once the country joins the EU. The pros and cons of this approach were discussed during the workshop, with the advantages in terms of dealing with mistrust counterbalanced by the fact that, under this scenario, the final solution may not be enshrined for another 10 or 15 years.
   b. An alternative approach would be to put the whole package (permanent name, NATO membership, EU negotiations) for approval in a referendum in FYROM/ROM shortly after the negotiations (see point c)
   c. In return for the constitutional name change and the agreement, Greece would lift its veto on FYROM/ROM joining NATO, and provide full support for FYROM/ROM immediate accession. Greece would furthermore allow the EU accession process to proceed, subject to the general accession criteria, and immediately convert its liaison offices to full embassies.
   d. 

4. Substantive solutions and name options
For such a delicate and sensitive issue, context is of the utmost importance. Resolving the name dispute is only plausible if combined with a meaningful change of policies and
conciliatory political behaviour on both sides, and when it is presented as part of a broader package that puts the bilateral relations between the two countries and their populations on a mutually respectful footing.

It was widely accepted in the workshop that, in order to achieve a solution, FYROM/ROM should amend its name but that this should be presented as moving from a temporary to a permanent name. There was also wide, though not absolute, agreement that the amended name should convey the fact that the country is only one part of the geographical region of Macedonia.

The workshop discussed some proposals for a new name. One participant revisited the current ‘Republic of Macedonia’ (R. Macedonia), by presenting it as a composite name, suggesting that R. Macedonia could be placed in international organisations and fora under the letter R. However, given that many countries have the word ‘Republic’ in front of their name and that this is the country’s current name, there was a wide consensus that this proposal would hardly be acceptable to the Greek side.

It was mentioned during the workshop that, in 1997, the Greek government had accepted the name ‘Republic of Macedonia (Skopje)’ (or ‘Republic of Macedonia-Skopje’), which was rejected by FYROM/ROM. In 2008, the FYROM/ROM government accepted this option, which was then rejected by Greece one year later. Several workshop participants viewed this as a possible solution that would satisfy both sides to a degree, since it had been accepted by both sides at different points in the past. Also, it met the requirement of being a composite name, without employing an adjective.

The option of ‘Northern Macedonia’ was also discussed, but argued against by most participants due to its political implications in FYROM/ROM. Presented by Nikola Gruevski as the worst possible solution during his time in office, this name would stir up nationalist feelings and empower nationalist forces. The name also raised a question: if the state is renamed as Northern Macedonia, what can be considered as Southern Macedonia? However, similar options such as ‘Upper Macedonia’ might pave the way for a possible compromise. It was also clarified that, despite the consensus among politicians in Greece to accept a composite name with a geographic qualifier, 6 out of 10 Greeks opposed the use of the word Macedonia in a composite name for FYROM. Thus, a referendum in Greece could threaten the process and, more negatively, it could lead to severe mistrust towards Greece in FYROM/ROM where ‘Northern Macedonia’ is thought of as the Greek name proposal for the resolution of the dispute.

‘New Macedonia’ was a further option put forward. It was actually one of the three options (along with ‘Vardar Macedonia’ and ‘North (Severna) Macedonia’) that were on the table under the Georgievski administration in the beginning of the 2000s. At the workshop, it seemed that the FYROM/ROM side was sceptical, not least because there is a newspaper called ‘Nova Makedonija’, which risks causing the name to be perceived more as a brand name rather than a country name. But the name has appeal for its accuracy.

In the workshop, the name ‘Slav Macedonia’ was deemed unacceptable to the Albanian minority in FYROM/ROM, as such an ethnic distinction excludes them.

Historically, once Greece had changed its original position about not including the term ‘Macedonia’ in the name, it accepted all three options on the table –‘Slav Macedonia’,
'New Macedonia' and 'Republic of Macedonia/Skopje'; however, FYROM/ROM rejected all three proposals under the previous government.

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While none of the proposed alternatives achieved widespread support during the workshop, all participants agreed that the present circumstances are ripe for a mutually beneficial compromise. A pragmatic solution will contribute to the stability of the wider region and provide perspectives for the future. It is in the interest of both countries to create a solid relationship for the generations to come. The healthy economic and commercial relations between the two countries are a positive characteristic, which should be emphasised. Enhancing the role of civil society in both countries could have a constructive effect. It is essential for both governments and mediators to acknowledge the fact that there is no perfect solution and that courageous concessions need to be made on both sides.

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- To foster cooperation between the academic and the policy making communities.