

## Macedonia and the Prespa Agreement

On 11 January 2019, the parliament of the Republic of Macedonia voted in favor (81 for, 39 against) of Amendments 33 through 36 to the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia. On 12 January, with the signature of the Speaker of Parliament, Talat Xhaferi, the Amendments were published in the *Služben vesnik* (Official Gazette) of the Republic of Macedonia. These Amendments involve the Republic of Macedonia's changing its name to the Republic of North Macedonia in accordance with the terms of the Prespa Agreement signed by the Prime Ministers of the Republic of Macedonia and the Hellenic Republic, Zoran Zaev and Alexis Tsipras, respectively, on 17 June 2018. The amendments represent a significant step in the resolution of the so-called "name dispute", but at this point they do not represent the end of a long, sad story. Rather, the amendments are worded in such a way that they will go into force if, and only if, the Greek parliament ratifies the Prespa Agreement. That vote is expected later in January 2019. Moreover, the President of the Republic of Macedonia, Georgi Ivanov, who is widely perceived as a puppet of the opposition VMRO-DPMNE, refuses to sign the Act of Parliament. Xhaferi insists that with their publication in the *Služben vesnik* the amendments have the force of law, but the opposition disputes this. Moreover, so-called "citizen's initiatives" (generally aligned with or members of VMRO-DPMNE) are attempting to collect 150,000 signatures to force a referendum challenging the amendments.

### So How Did We Get Here?

The Prespa Agreement seeks to break a deadlock that the international community has allowed Greece to impose on Macedonia since the latter seceded peacefully from Yugoslavia at the end of 1991. Despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of UN members (including the US, UK, China, and Russia) have recognized the Republic of Macedonia under its constitutional name (in use in more or less the same form since 1944), and despite the fact that Greece was legally obligated to allow Macedonia to join international organizations using the UN name (which Greek nationalists like to call "the international name") — "The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" — in 2008 Greece was allowed to block Macedonia's membership in NATO even under the UN name. Greece was found in violation of the UN agreement by the International Court of Justice in The Hague, but the Court refused to impose any sanctions against Greece for its violation. Just after the NATO debacle, a right-wing nationalist party (VMRO-DPMNE) cemented its power in Macedonia and subsequently misruled the country until 2015, when illegally wiretapped conversations of their own government officials were revealed to the public. The documents are on the web, and they make the Watergate Tapes look like polite conversation. (The documents can be accessed at <http://prizma.birn.eu.commk/стории/комплетен-материјал-од-сите-33-бомби-на-опозицијата>.)

Between January and May of 2015, Zoran Zaev, then head of the opposition party SDSM and now prime minister, published a total of 38 selections of the conversations in press conferences entitled 'The Truth about Macedonia' but popularly known as the *Bombi* (bombs). The *Bombi* document an appalling amount of corruption including election fraud, bribery, violations of property law and city planning, vengeful destruction of property, judicial corruption, undermining the educational system, illegal wiretapping of 20,000 private citizens, an unplanned extra-judicial killing, a planned rape, and more. As of this writing, there are dozens of individual court cases that have resulted from the *Bombi*, but the trials are dragging on for various reasons. VMRO-DPMNE's former leader and prime minister, Nikola Gruevski, was successfully convicted in one of the many cases pending against him, but he succeeded in escaping Macedonia and is currently on the lam as the guest of Hungary's "illiberal" leader Viktor Orbán. That the current president of the Republic of Macedonia has repeatedly tried to

shield VMRO- DPMNE and prevent SDSM from functioning does not help matters. Moreover, the early parliamentary elections in 2016 that resulted from the (peaceful) popular uprising over the 2015 Bombi did not give SDSM a sufficient majority to change the constitution (which requires two thirds of the 120 seat parliament), and VMRO-DPMNE continues to function as the main opposition political party (with 39 seats). A national referendum on the Prespa Agreement was held on 30 September 2018. Since history is instrumentalized in politics, a bit of history is in order before discussing the 30 September referendum and subsequent events.

### **Macedonian as a Glossonym**

Ancient Macedonian was a language whose relationship to Ancient Greek is uncertain owing to the

paucity of textual evidence — we do not have a single sentence in this language, only isolated lexical items. It was definitely Indo-European, but whether it was a sibling to the Hellenic that gave rise to the Ancient Greek dialects or descended from a different Indo-European branch is uncertain. Greek nationalists insist it was a dialect of Greek, but for example, Ancient Macedonian did not participate in the Hellenic devoicing of voiced aspirates (cf. Ancient Greek *pher-* Ancient Macedonian *ber-* ‘bear, carry’), although some Greeks argue that this obvious difference is due to inadequate orthography. Be that as it may, Ancient Macedonian ceased to be spoken after the 4th century BCE, and it was ultimately replaced by the Hellenic Koine that replaced all the Ancient Greek dialects (except the Doric that survives in Tsakonian). A 4th century BCE curse tablet found at Pella (later Postol, and now again Pella), in what is now Greek Macedonia, is written in a peculiar form of Doric, but this document tells us nothing about Ancient Macedonian. It only tells us what we already knew: Ancient Greek was being used in Ancient Macedonia in the 4th century. Greek nationalists who claim Ancient Macedonian as a dialect of Ancient Greek because Ancient Greek (or Hellenistic Koine Greek) was spoken in Ancient Macedonia can be compared to someone claiming that the Romance dialect that became French was a dialect of Gaulish.

Modern Macedonian is a South Slavic language whose ancestral speakers arrived in the Balkans from what is now northeastern Europe approximately 1,500 years ago, at which time Ancient Macedonian itself had not been spoken for about a thousand years. In the nineteenth century, the name Macedonian began to be used for the South Slavic dialects that became Modern Macedonian. The situation is not unlike that of the Romance-speaking French who call their language *français*, which is derived from the Germanic tribal name — *Frank* — or the Slavic-speaking Bulgarians, who call their language *bălgarski*, from the Turkic tribal name *Bolğar*.

### **Macedonia as a Toponym**

The boundaries of a region called *Macedonia* have changed significantly over time, but for the purposes of the present-day H. R. Wilkinson (*Maps and Politics: A Review of the Ethnographic Cartography of Macedonia*, 1951, p.1) can be quoted: “... the opening of the nineteenth century still found western European scholars thinking in terms of Ptolemy and Strabo. Macedonia to them meant the Roman province framed by a natural boundary of mountains marching with geometrical precision on all sides— the *Pindhus*, the *Scardus*, the *Rhodope*.” From this is clear that the northwestern boundary for “Macedonia” in late classical times was north of modern Tetovo, i.e. the Shar mountains. It is this Macedonia — which in the late 19th century was mostly made up of the Ottoman vilayets of Selânik, Monastir and the southern part of Kosova (Üsküb) — that was the object of conflicting Serbian, Bulgarian, Greek, Albanian, and Aromanian territorial claims. There was also a homegrown movement that was dominated, but not exclusively, by Slavic (now Macedonian) speaking Christians.

At that time, the classical definition cited by Wilkinson was accepted by almost all the rival claimants, including the Greek ones (e.g. C. Nicolaïdes *La Macédoine*, 1899). At issue, prior to the Balkan Wars of 1912-13, was not so much the definition of the territory (the differences among almost all the various claimants were relatively minor), but rather what today we would call the ethno-linguistic make-up of that territory, which in turn was used to justify the competing territorial claims among the nascent and would-be nation-states. I have discussed the details elsewhere (Observing the Observers: Language, Ethnicity, and Power in the 1994 Macedonian Census and Beyond. In *Toward Comprehensive Peace in Southeastern Europe: Conflict Prevention in the South Balkans*, ed. by Barnett Rubin. New York: Council on Foreign Relations/Twentieth Century Fund. 1996. 81-105 & 119-126). For the purposes here, the point is that it was not until well after the 1913 Treaties of Bucharest and London — which partitioned Macedonia between Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria, and Albania — that Greece began to claim that only the part of Macedonia that it had been awarded was “Macedonia”. The origin of this claim, however, appears to be Serbian, viz. Spiridon Gopčević (*Makedonien und Alt-Serbien*, 1889), who advanced Serbian territorial claims by labeling the part of Macedonia that Serbia ultimately received in 1913 as “Old Serbia”.

### **The Population of Macedonia**

After Greece succeeded in annexing the southern half of the geographic region that had come to be known as Macedonia, it set about imposing the Greek language on the population, the majority of which did not speak Greek at that time. Greek nationalists have cited a 1926 report by the League of Nations’ Refugee Settlement Commission that gave the region’s population in 1913 as 42.6% Greek, 39.4%

Muslim, 9.9% Bulgarian, and 8.1% other. However, these percentages are based religious affiliation, not language. The “Greeks” were loyal to the Greek Orthodox Church, the “Bulgarians” identified with the Bulgarian Exarchate, and, as should be clear to anyone, “Muslim” is not a language. Greek destruction of minority languages on its territory is well known and well documented. An exception is the *Abecedar*, a Macedonian primer published in Athens in 1925, and republished in Salonica in 2006, when Greece was fined by the International Court of Justice in The Hague for violating the human rights of its Macedonian-speaking minority. Overall, Greece’s linguicidal policies are part of what drives Greek antagonism to Modern Macedonian. Moreover, the aggression continues. On 2 June 2009, in Athens, at the book launch of the first Modern Macedonian-Modern Greek dictionary to be published in Greece, the launch was disrupted by 15 thugs from the Golden Dawn (a Greek political party currently with 18 seats in Parliament), who vandalized the podium and threatened all of us who were present.

Meanwhile, back in former Yugoslavia, in the part of Macedonia annexed by Serbia in 1913 and made part of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes after World War I (renamed Yugoslavia in 1929), Serbian nationalists unsuccessfully tried to convince the Slavic-speaking population that what they spoke was a dialect of Serbian. By the 1920s, as attested to by numerous sources, many or most of Slavic-speaking inhabitants of “Old Serbia” thought of themselves as Macedonians and of their language as Macedonian, a movement that was already underway in 19th century (e.g., Georgi Pulevski’s dictionary of 1875). From 1922 to 1929 the Kingdom was divided administratively into 33 provinces (*oblast*), the southernmost most three of which — Skopje, Bitola, and Bregalnica — corresponded very closely to what became the Peoples Republic of Macedonia in 1944. From 1929 to 1941, Yugoslavia was reorganized into 9 banates (*banovina*), and the Macedonian oblasts were subsumed as part of the Vardar Banovina, which also included parts of what is today southern Kosovo and southern Serbia. Then from 1941-1944 Macedonia was again partitioned, and the part that would become the

Republic of Macedonia was given mostly to Bulgaria, while the westernmost part (along a line from Tetovo to Struga) went to Albania. The Bulgarian occupiers thoroughly alienated the local population by doing things like beating children for speaking Macedonian (what most Bulgarians still call “Bulgarian dialect”) in school. In the Albanian part, schooling was available only in Albanian (which, however, had not been permitted in schools in the first Yugoslavia). Even the Turks there had to go to school in Albanian. So by the time Tito’s partisans liberated Macedonia from the fascists, all Tito had to do was harness the already-existing Macedonian national sentiment by recognizing a Macedonian republic with Macedonian as its official language. (See especially Andrew Rossos on this period.) The claim that Tito “invented” Macedonian in order to keep the territory as part of Yugoslavia is mere prevarication.

### The September 30 Referendum

So much for the historical background. Let us return now to the present and recent past. As already noted, a national referendum on the Prespa Agreement was held in the Republic of Macedonia on 30 September. The wording of the referendum was: “Are you in favor of European Union and NATO membership by accepting the agreement between the Republic of Macedonia and the Republic of Greece?” The referendum could only be binding if 50%+1 of the total electorate approved it. Leaving

to one side the problematic nature of the electoral roles given the corruption documented in the *Bombi*, the referendum was not so much about changing the name (although that was a part of it); it was about Macedonia’s access to Western institutions and also a test for whether rule of law could triumph over right-wing, populist nationalism and corruption, as documented in the *Bombi*. Right-wingers promoted the slogan *Imeto ne go davame* ‘We aren’t giving up the name’. This sloganeering was viewed as a cynical attempt by VMRO-DPMNE to return to power and its previous corrupt practices, as seen in this cartoon:



A View of VMRO-DPMNE’s Motivation for Boycotting the Referendum

We aren’t giving up the “ime” (name)/“vime” (udder)  
And the stool is upside down

The Prespa Agreement itself is a genuine compromise that, while testifying to the weakness of the international community in dealing with Greece’s misbehavior and bullying, nonetheless has delivered an adequate solution, so far, under the circumstances. As I pointed out in an article published on the web site of *Foreign Affairs* (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/greece/2018-10-01/names-macedonia-north-macedonia>), the Republic of Macedonia is indeed the northern part of geographic Macedonia. Thus the name “Republic of North Macedonia” does not contradict the geographic definition of Macedonia that has been current for the past two centuries or so and whose origins do go

back to antiquity. Moreover, the name “Republic of North Macedonia” obviates the specious Greek claim that the name “Republic of Macedonia” implies pretensions to Greek territory.

The Prespa Agreement states: “The official language of the Second Party shall be the ‘Macedonian language’, as recognized by the Third UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, held in Athens in 1977.” Anti-referendum forces claimed that the reference to the 1977 conference undermined recognition of the Macedonian language, but in fact, in the more than 500 pages of the two volumes from that conference, Macedonian is mentioned a total of 7 times, and always as a language with its Cyrillic alphabet. Greece thus acknowledged Macedonian as a language at that conference.

Article 7, ¶4 of the Prespa Agreement reads: “The Second Party notes that its official language, the Macedonian language, is within the group of South Slavic languages. The Parties note that the official language and other attributes of the Second Party are not related to the ancient Hellenic civilization, history, culture and heritage of the northern region of the First Party.” This formulation derives from Greece’s claim that it had a monopoly on the use of the name “Macedonian”. In the Republic of Macedonia, one response to this claim was to accept the Greek notion that use of the name ‘Macedonian’ implied descent from Ancient Macedonian (which is like saying that French is descended from Frankish rather than Latin). And if Modern Macedonian is descended from Ancient Macedonian, then it is not a Slavic language. This pseudo-science was embraced by various political actors, but was especially promoted by VMRO-DPMNE as part of its policy of “antiquitization”, which added to a climate of falsehood and corruption.

Despite its obvious shortcomings, the Prespa Agreement does confirm the name and existence of the Macedonian language and Macedonian identity, and it opens the way for Macedonia to “sit at the same table” with Greece, Bulgaria, etc. It is a matter of being pragmatic, as my Macedonian friends and colleagues have said. As Jess Bailey, the US ambassador in Macedonia said to me, it means that, with accession to NATO, Albania, Bulgaria and Greece will be transformed from “neighbors” into “allies” bound by treaty. To be sure, although Cyprus is a bit of a thorn in the eye of such thinking, it is nonetheless also true that the Turkish and Hellenic republics were never directly at war. But just as Russia makes sure that Transnistria, Abkhazia, and east Ukraine remain unresolved, so, too, did Greece ensure the division of Cyprus by blackmailing the EU into admitting its client part of the island before the division could be resolved.

The fact that VMRO-DPMNE and Russia were against the success of Macedonia’s referendum and are now against the amendments is an indication that it was in the best interest of Macedonia to approve the referendum and that the amendments are likewise in Macedonia’s best interest. In fact, despite VMRO-DPMNE’s posturing, Bomba #33 [16.V.2015] documents VMRO-DPMNE’s readiness to accept the same name change while it was in power. Given the current talk of border changes in countries north of Macedonia, once Macedonia is in NATO it will have an extra argument in favor of its territorial integrity, and chances are moderately good that the internationals will support it. Moreover, in the Prespa Agreement the Greeks officially acknowledge that there is more than one interpretation of history — something they have, until now, never been willing to do.

Although the smaller right-wing parties called for a boycott of the referendum in August, VMRO-DPMNE played coy until 21 September, when it also called for a boycott, after which Macedonia’s President duly followed suit on 27 September. By announcing a boycott, VMRO-DPMNE was able to intimidate the thousands of voters who depended on them for their jobs, and indeed VMRO-DPMNE employees were caught illegally photographing people who went

to the polling places. It was thus clear that this referendum was not only about getting the international community to support Macedonia as it should, but also about the rule of law in Macedonia itself. Once VMRO-DPMNE had announced its support of a boycott, the reaction of other Macedonians can be illustrated in this image composed by Acad. Prof. Dr. Marjan Markovikj from a photo taken in Karposh, a neighborhood in Skopje:



**#For Macedonia [to remain the] same so it won't be clean**

**Hey, you traitorous trash,  
are you going to vote in the referendum?**

**Are you missing a board [= do you have a screw loose]?  
As you can see, I am boycotting!**

Approximately 37% of the electorate voted in the referendum, and of those who voted, 94% were in favor. This meant the referendum had no legal force and made parliament responsible for passing the amendments, if possible.

### **From Referendum to Rule of Law (Sort Of)**

As a result of the failure of the 30 September referendum, it was necessary for SDSM to cobble together enough votes, including some from VMRO-DPMNE (as it turned out, 8). There is widespread speculation that in order to get those votes, the rule of law had to be compromised. Not only has the convicted former VMRO-DPMNE prime minister Nikola Gruevski escaped to Hungary, as noted above, but on 17 January, it was announced that Nikola Vojminovski, who, along with 6 other men, was convicted of the attempted murder of parliamentarian Zijadin Sela during the events of Bloody

Thursday, has also escaped. Bloody Thursday is the popular name given to the organized storming of parliament by about 200 VMRO-DPMNE members and supporters on 27 April 2017, just moments after Talat Xhaferi was elected Speaker of Parliament. As stated in Wikipedia ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2017\\_storming\\_of\\_Macedonian\\_Parliament](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2017_storming_of_Macedonian_Parliament)): “Many were masked and they threw chairs and punches at journalists and MPs, injuring SDSM leader Zoran Zaev. Radmila Šekerinska, deputy head of the SDSM, required stitches

after being dragged by her hair. Police had to deploy stun grenades to break up the mob.” A number of these attackers were “amnestied” by an act of parliament on 18 December, which is widely seen as part of the price for the necessary votes ratifying the Prespa Agreement.

### Looking Ahead

On 16 January, Tsipras’ government survived a no confidence vote, 151 to 148. That was the minimum needed, but it is good enough for Greece’s Parliament to vote on accepting the Prespa Agreement, probably on January 21 or 22. In Greece, as in Macedonia, right-wing nationalist populist elements are working hard to scuttle the agreement. For all its problems, the Prespa Agreement is an attempt by the Macedonian left and the Greek left to reach a compromise that will benefit the world order, which, as Ivo Daalder and James Matthews argued recently in *Foreign Affairs*, needs to be saved. It is the Macedonian and Greek nationalist, populist right and extreme right, that are attempting to derail the agreement, and their goals are the same as the opponents of the current world order, such as Trump and Putin. As I wrote in an article published on the web site of *Foreign Affairs* (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/greece/2018-10-19/naming-and-shaming-balkans>): “Macedonia is a tiny country, and, on the scale of world powers, Greece is not much bigger. Viruses, however, are microscopic, yet they can wreck enough damage to destroy civilizations. Right-wing nationalism and populism are the viruses of our time. The Prespa Agreement is a small but significant attempt at vaccination.”

At a polling place in Karposh for the 30 September referendum, I overheard a woman about my age (full disclosure: I was born in 1949) say to a friend: “I’m old, and it’s all the same to me, but I’m voting for the sake of the young people.” And for the sake of those young people, here’s hoping and that the right-wing populist nationalists in both countries will be stopped, that Greece will ratify the Prespa Agreement, and that Macedonia’s way forward will become clear.

### Post-script

While Macedonia’s foreign affairs are currently cause for guarded optimism, pollution remains a domestic challenge, one that local actors are trying to meet: See <https://dirty-secret.net/>.

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(The opinions expressed in this piece are those of the author.)