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## THE PRESPA AGREEMENT: A POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY

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### ABSTRACT

The subject of the research is the Prespa Agreement, which gave North Macedonia a new name, in exchange for support from Greece in North Macedonia's aspirations towards the European Union and NATO. The paper analyzes the key points from the first part of the agreement, which are the essence of the Macedonian-Greek naming issue: the formulation of the Macedonian nationality, the recognition of the Macedonian language, the differences in understanding and the possibility of using the terms Macedonia and Macedonian for the both sides, as well as the meaning of the agreement in a broader political sense. There are a number of researches on the topic of Macedonian-Greek issue, which are more focused on the naming problem, from the occurrence to its solution, so the main goal of this paper is to try to give another, political-geographic overview of the identity issues arising after the Prespa Agreement.

**Keywords:** Identity, naming issue, nationality, Macedonian, Prespa agreement

### INTRODUCTION

The long-standing Macedonian-Greek naming dispute was finally solved with an agreement that also has a long name: Final Agreement for the settlement of the differences as described in the United Nations Security Council resolutions 817 (1993) and 845 (1993), the termination of the Interim Accord of 1995, and the establishment of a strategic partnership between the Parties [14]. Simply known as The Prespa Agreement, signed on 17 June 2018 on the banks of Prespa Lake, is a bilateral agreement with mutual relations, frontiers, dispute settlement and cooperations as a subject terms [18]. The agreement regulates the Macedonian name issue, which according to Nimetz, is one of the more unusual international confrontations [12], although geographical naming disputes are not uncommon between and within states [8].

The agreement consists of three parts: the first part, entitled Settlement of the difference on the name, the pending issues related to it and entrenchment of good neighbourly relations, with a total of 8 articles; part 2, under the title Intensification and enrichment of cooperation between the two parties, which deals with Diplomatic relations, Cooperation in the context of International and regional organizations and fora, Political and societal cooperation, Economic cooperation, Cooperation on the fields of education, science, culture, research, technology, Health and sports, Police and civil protection cooperation, Defence cooperation, Treaty relations; and part 3: Settlement of disputes, which contains 3 articles. According to Article 20, the Agreement was signed by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs from both Parties, and was witnessed by Matthew Nimetz, the personal Envoy of the Secretary General of the United Nations, in accordance with the Security Council resolutions 817 (1993) and 845 (1993) [14].

The agreement entered into force on February 12, 2019, after both North Macedonia and Greece ratified the agreement in their respective parliaments. The Macedonian part in particular was quite turbulent. In September 2018, North Macedonia held a consultative referendum, in which Macedonian citizens were asked "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 majority of the voters who turned out voted "yes", but the total number of turnouts was far below the legal threshold, so the referendum almost destroyed the entire Prespa process. The issue then was transferred to the Macedonian parliament where, after a series of political turbulences, the agreement was supported and voted by 2/3 of the members of the Assembly, so the constitutional amendments were implemented.

The paper mainly focuses on the first part of the agreement, which contains the points that at the same time are a solution and a problem that emerges from the solution. The name change and the construction of the name North Macedonia and its effect on the identity essence of the Macedonian question is highlighted, but also the other articles of the first part of the agreement that have a certain control function - the resolution of the status of the Macedonian language, the formulation of the nationality in North Macedonia, the differences and similarities in the understanding of the term Macedonia and Macedonian, as well as the possible problems that will arise from the agreement itself in the time being.

### **THE CHANGE: NOMEN EST OMEN**

The Prespa agreement represents the end of the Macedonian-Greek problem regarding the right to use the name Macedonia, but also the beginning of the identity issues arising from the problem and its solution. With the Agreement, the Republic of Macedonia changed its name to the Republic of North Macedonia, somewhat a compromise solution, considering the maximalist policy of Greece from the beginning of the 90s and the opposition to the term Macedonia being included in the name of the newly formed independent country. The abandonment of that maximalist position is a result of different dynamics of the dispute itself, filled with different positions and problems on both sides, until the political alignment in 2017, when both Greece and North Macedonia were ruled by left-wing political structures, willing to take effort to solve the problem. The essence of the problem itself is not only the name of the state, but the right to use the ancient brand Macedonia and everything that that term reflects. Such is the Prespa agreement, which contains not only the solution for the name change, but also the regulation of things to come after the change, because "identity is at the core of the Macedonian name dispute" [11]. According to Article 1.3a, the constitutional name for the second party that will be used erga omnes is the Republic of North Macedonia, and the short version is North Macedonia [14]. North in North Macedonia is a noun, not an adjective, which means that it is an integral part of the name of the country, not a reference. Therefore, the only abbreviated/shortened name of the country is North Macedonia; under no circumstances can it be N. Macedonia, or any other creative way to avoid the composite name, because both North and Macedonia in the name North Macedonia are equal parts. In addition, North Macedonia is the only independent and sovereign country in the world that has the noun "North", because although it is almost non-existent as common knowledge, the name of North Korea is Democratic People's Republic of Korea, nor, in other example, can the essence of the North-South problem be compared with Sudan and South Sudan, because Greece is not called Macedonia [8]. All this is contrary to the folklore narrative

present mainly among the apologists of the Prespa Agreement in North Macedonia, where it is said that "North in the name is just an adjective", and "where there is north, there is also south". That is not true, and the problem is much more complex than that.

## **BEING MACEDONIAN**

The conclusion is that according to the Prespa Agreement, the Macedonian language and nationality are explicitly recognized [5], [7], while Vankovska believes that the Prespa Agreement promotes nationality as a political term (demos), turning North Macedonia into a civic state [20] According to article 1.3b, the nationality of the Second Party shall be Macedonian/citizen of the Republic of North Macedonia, as it will be registered in all travel documents [13]. This is both an elegant and problematic solution at the same time. The reference citizen of the Republic of North Macedonia is set to avoid direct application of the new name to the formulation of the nationality: North Macedonia – North Macedonian, something that would complicate the situation to the greatest extent in terms of the identity issue. In this way, the first party (Greece) accepts the term Macedonian, but only with the clarification that it is a citizen of North Macedonia and not of Greece, which is in direct context with Article 7 of the agreement, i.e. the understanding that the term Macedonia and Macedonian have different historical context, and that a Macedonian who is a citizen of North Macedonia is diametrically different from a Macedonian who lives in Macedonia, the northern part of Greece.

With or without the agreement, the very formulation of the term nationality in the documents issued by North Macedonia is problematic. The term nationality in identity cards and travel documents is actually citizenship, and does not reflect ethnicity. North Macedonia, like the vast majority of countries in the world, does not register the ethnicity of its citizens in travel documents. There is no document (birth certificate, identity card, passport) issued by North Macedonia that proves ethnic identity, but only citizenship, which is referred to as nationality. Even Bosnia and Herzegovina, a country which post-Dayton functions on the basis of the rights of the three constituent peoples (Bosniaks, Serbs, Croats), does not register the national affiliation, but only the citizenship on the state issued documents.

The confusing part of this formulation is not only because of the composition, but also the understanding of the problem among the majority of the Macedonian people. The general public does not know and is not aware that the national identity does not appear in any state issued document. In conditions where the public does not differentiate between nationality and citizenship, the formula Macedonian/citizen of the Republic of North Macedonia was understood and accepted as a direct blow to the national identity of the Macedonians - erasing the Macedonian nation and establishing a rough civil identity in North Macedonia. Such a narrative was further fuelled by several fake news prone social media in the country during a post Prespa bureaucratic procedure period. Namely, in a short period of time when issuing new birth and citizenship certificates, instead of the standard wording of Macedonian citizenship, during the transfer to Macedonian/citizen of the Republic of North Macedonia, according to the needs imposed by the Prespa Agreement, several documents were issued where the citizenship column was filled with slashes (nationality: ///). Such a technical-bureaucratic oversight was enough to strengthen the narrative that "Macedonians have been erased as a nation", although the slashes are in the column for citizenship, and citizenship has the same wording for the other nationalities in North Macedonia also (Albanian, Turkish, Serbian, etc.). In addition, the term Macedonian in the recognized Macedonian language, as well

as in the Macedonian nationality, is explained through the following article (1, 3d) The terms "Macedonia" and "Macedonian" have the meaning given under Article 7 of this Agreement, Where Article 7 says that both Greece and North Macedonia recognize that the terms Macedonia and Macedonian have a different historical context and historical legacy (7.1.). When the term is used by Greece, it means the northern part of Greece and the people living in that region, their attributes and the whole continuity from the Hellenic civilization to the present day. Accordingly, Greece receives the entire right to use the brand Macedonia, which has continuity from ancient times to the present day – the essence of the Macedonian-Greek problem.

When the term is used by North Macedonia, the terms denote its territory, language, people and their attributes, with their own history, culture, and heritage, distinctly different from those referred to under Article 7(2). First, North Macedonia cannot use the term Macedonia without further specifying, in this case the part of the name, North Macedonia. Similarly, but a little more flexible is the term Macedonian: even in terms of the language, there must be an explanation that the language is from the South Slavic language group, which means that the Macedonian language has nothing to do with the Macedonian language from the ancient era, about we know almost nothing [9].

Secondly, North Macedonia as a country cannot use the term Macedonian in every form and situation. Article 1.3f reflects that problem: The adjectival reference to the State, its official organs, and other public entities shall be in line with the official name of the Second Party or its short name, that is, "of the Republic of North Macedonia" or "of North Macedonia". Other adjectival usages, including those referring to private entities and actors, that are not related to the State and public entities, are not established by law and do not enjoy financial support from the State for activities abroad, may be in line with Article 7(3) and (4), that is, the understanding of the different geographical and historical context of the term Macedonian and what it represents [13]. This is somewhat in line with the civic context that Vankovska writes about, because with the wording where there is no Macedonian prefix, it is avoided to assign a national identity to the institutions that come from North Macedonia. But on the other hand, and more in line with the Prespa Agreement and the intention of Greece, the explicit use of the term Macedonian must be avoided. Nimetz explains this as an awkward formulation which solved a problem [12]. And the solved problem consists in finding a way to avoid the term North Macedonian, nor to use the plain term Macedonian, when, for example, talking about the prime minister of North Macedonia. According to the Agreement, he is Prime Minister of North Macedonia; he is not Macedonian, nor North Macedonian Prime Minister. Nimitz clarifies that this "usage applies solely to official usage; what people use in unofficial contexts is a matter of ordinary use of language". It is the ordinary use of language that is the problematic part regarding the possibility of developing the term North Macedonian instead of plain Macedonian. For example, in ordinary use of the Macedonian language, the Prime minister of South Korea, is South Korean Prime minister (Juznokorejskiot premier), or Brendan Rodgers is Northern Irish football manager (Severnoirec). That means that even in the Macedonian ordinary use of language, the term North Macedonian is common.

The Government of North Macedonia issued Q&A website for the public, as well as guidelines for the media precisely on the correct use of the term Macedonian [15], [17], where it is clarified that anything connected to the state, the government, the presidency, private entities and actors related to the state or activities financed by the state abroad will use the adjective North, but it is not necessary to use it otherwise, for example for food

[15]. According to Braun et al., the modifier, e.g. for describing the origin of things, is not affected by the change either, so that cheese from North Macedonia remains Macedonian cheese, whereas neither "North Macedonians" nor "North Macedonian cheese" exist [4]. Similar to that argument, on the website of the Government it is emphasized that one can also talk about Macedonian culture, Macedonian history, Macedonian literature, the Macedonian Cyrillic alphabet, Macedonian churches, Macedonian ethnic identity and so on, but also that it should be taken into account that Macedonia and Macedonians mean something distinctly different in Greece [15]. Meaning that when there is another type of Macedonia and Macedonians that are distinctly different, then at any cost there must be an additional explanation of which type we are talking about.

The main question is whether the term Macedonian can be used when talking about Macedonians from North Macedonia in an ethnic sense. Since the agreement does not address this directly, and Article 1.3b is intended for Macedonian nationality (citizenship) and it does not cover only ethnic Macedonians, but all citizens of North Macedonia regardless of their ethnicity, then it is a matter of what Nimetz emphasizes as ordinary use of language. First, according to the agreement, there are two basic types of Macedonians, while from the problems in understanding the agreement itself, there are additional subtypes of Macedonians. As defined in article 7, point 3 and the different understanding of the term Macedonian, in the northern part of Greece, live Macedonians who are direct heirs of the glorious Hellenic civilization. In North Macedonia, on the other hand, live Macedonians who have their own specific history and characteristics, completely different from the Macedonians from the northern part of Greece. But they are both Macedonians. Not only that to claim to have a 'culture, and heritage, distinctly different' from those of one's neighbour's is as futile on historical grounds as it is fundamental for any national conception of history [16], but this formulation further complicates the situation in understanding and solving the problem. Although Greece does not recognize any nationality other than Greek, and no matter how it is regulated and perceived, in Macedonia, i.e. the northern part of Greece, among other, live Slavic speakers, who identify themselves as Macedonians, who according to the agreement they are Macedonians, direct heirs of the Hellenic civilization, although according to their attributes they are much more similar to the second type of Macedonians, i.e. the Macedonians who live in North Macedonia, and who, according to the agreement, have a totally different characteristic from those Macedonians who are of ancient continuity.

The Prespa process and the whole understanding of the problem creates another, political inner Macedonian problem, that Ognen Vangelov calls a possibility of a creation of a bifurcated ethno-nation with an intractable cleavage (two sorts of Macedonians within Macedonia) which would create a protracted instability [19]. In short, in the second type of Macedonians (from North Macedonia) there is one type of Macedonians who are in line with the narrative of the Prespa Agreement and the South Slavic genesis, and the other type of Macedonians, strict opponents of the agreement itself who consider that one of the biggest problems of the agreement itself is the loss of the ancient line. This division is somewhat a continuation and confirmation of the polarization of Macedonian society along the lines of those who "defend" the Macedonian national identity and those who "harm" it [2].

The two main types of Macedonians that the agreement itself treats have a regional identity (Greek Macedonians) and a national identity (Macedonians from North Macedonia). Considering that Macedonians with a regional identity cannot reflect

"Macedonianism" outside of Greece, the main question is whether Macedonians from North Macedonia will be treated as plain Macedonians, or ordinary use of language will formulate the demonym North Macedonian, analogous to the new name of the state, and to differ the Macedonians from North Macedonia from the Macedonians from Macedonia (Greece).

In some sense of what Pergantis [13] points out that the limitations of the law of treaties and the consensual construction of inter-State relations, as well as the ambivalent language of the Agreement regarding North Macedonia's obligation to promote the name solution, lead to the conclusion that the Agreement cannot produce effects on third parties, especially on whether others will address the people living in North Macedonia with Macedonian or North Macedonians. Or similar to what Kofos [10] emphasizes about the name of the state before the Prespa Agreement, where third parties who neither understand the problem nor want to have anything to do with it, developed the possibility for the state to be called Republic Macedonia, or just plain Macedonia. Thus, post Prespa, it depends on the will and the ordinary use of language of third parties whether the exonym for Macedonians will have a reference like the name of the state or not.

### **BETWEEN THE HAMMER AND THE ANVIL**

North Macedonia began its European and Atlantic path in the mid-1990s, being the first post-Yugoslav state to sign the Membership Action Plan (MAP) with the Alliance (1999) and the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with the European Union (2001) [3]. All political parties in North Macedonia have EU and NATO membership as a strategic goal in their platforms [18]; therefore, there can be no discussion of any alternative geopolitical orientation of North Macedonia instead of EU and NATO membership, although one can argue that popular support for EU and especially NATO is far lesser than the numbers operated, which are probably a replica of the corresponding party conviction.

Greece managed to tie North Macedonia's aspirations for membership in the European Union and NATO to the naming issue, so the entire "Prespa process", including the referendum, was linked to EU & NATO in a way of compensation. Such was the rhetoric in the positive campaign of the domestic political protagonists, as well as of the high foreign statesmen who spoke about the future of North Macedonia, although membership in the European Union was never explicitly promised and guaranteed. After the entry into force of the Prespa agreement, North Macedonia was introduced as the 30th member of the NATO pact, while the European path did not get the expected accelerated dynamics. North Macedonia did not start accession negotiations in 2019, as President Macron felt that the enlargement process needed to be restructured before negotiations could open [6]; nor in 2020, when North Macedonia was blocked again, this time by Bulgaria, supposedly for not fulfilling the previously agreed. Currently, the European path of North Macedonia is laid out by solving the problem with Bulgaria, which essentially covers the identity lines of North Macedonia, with whom Greece had no problem.

The Prespa agreement takes on a different dimension whenever a new obstacle appears on the European path of North Macedonia, as in the case of the problem imposed by Bulgaria. But when North Macedonia once accepted the painful compromise for the greater good (EU and NATO), then it is understood that there is no other way, but all the way, which further complicates the negotiating position of North Macedonia.

The Prespa Agreement has another great meaning in regional political geography. Many analysts have quickly tried to draw parallels or lessons learned from the Prespa

Agreement for a potential Kosovo-Serbia deal [1], and they have a point. At the very beginning, the agreement was seen as a model for compromise, peace and tolerance. But with the passage of time, and the futility of the agreement itself in context of the European path of North Macedonia, the question begins to arise whether other countries would decide on a similar solutions, after what happened to North Macedonia after Prespa. On the other hand, after the Russian aggression in Ukraine (2022) and the NATO consolidation and membership aspiration of Finland (fulfilled) and Sweden (pending), North Macedonia's membership in NATO and the guaranteed political stability add a strong and positive light to the painful compromise from Prespa.

## CONCLUSION

The essence of the political geography of North Macedonia in a neighboring and regional context lies in constant proving of the similarities and differences with the others, as well as the unequivocal need for convergence in the large European and NATO family. Ever since independence, the country's central geopolitical goal has been the membership in the European Union and NATO, which was largely obstructed by the valuable voice of Greece, which imposed the bilateral problem of the use of the term "Macedonia" at the international level and as a reception element for North Macedonia in the EU and NATO. With the Prespa Agreement, after 27 years of a period filled with different dynamics, North Macedonia and Greece agreed to put on paper how much they differ and to emphasize to the world how much those differences mean and how they should be implemented. The name change from the Republic of Macedonia to North Macedonia with *erga omnes* status represents the tip of the iceberg of the entire naming issue process. The possibility of the different understanding and use of the terms Macedonia and Macedonian is the main subject of the content of the agreement, but also the very reason for the agreement itself. It is regulated that both Greece and North Macedonia, when it comes to the term Macedonia and Macedonian, mean two different things, of which Greece retains the right to the Macedonia brand, while North Macedonia may not use the term Macedonia without the noun North in front. The same is true for the term Macedonian - although the agreement acknowledges the Macedonian language when talking about the language spoken by the majority of the citizens of North Macedonia, there is still a certain reference in that direction, i.e. an explanation that that language is a South Slavic language, which separates it from the ancient Macedonian language. Official authorities from North Macedonia cannot use the term Macedonian, but rather the wording "of North Macedonia" – awkward formula just to avoid the term North Macedonian, which would come naturally as an explanation of which type of Macedonian we are talking about. Similar, practical but awkward is the formulation of nationality, that is, the status of citizenship for Macedonian citizens. Post Prespa, the nationality is Macedonian/citizen of North Macedonia, which is another proof that North Macedonia cannot use the term Macedonian without an explanation. In order to avoid the resulting North Macedonian in terms of citizenship, the solution was reached with an explanation, that the Macedonian is from North Macedonia. A certain time is needed to see if the ethnonym for the Macedonians will be plain Macedonian, or ordinary use of language will form the term North Macedonian, given that the Prespa Agreement does not explicitly regulate that issue, nor a third party is obligated to understand that problem; as well as the fact that shortly after the implementation of the agreement, there are already indications for both variants. On the other hand, it is problematic to use the terms Macedonia and Macedonian for Greece as well, given that Macedonia is a regional entity

within the country itself, while the term Macedonian is assigned and refers to people living in the northern region of the country, that identify themselves with the regional Macedonian identity, which cannot have an external identification (exonym).

One of the functions of the agreement was the opening of the open doors of the EU and NATO for the long-time aspirant North Macedonia. In 2020, North Macedonia promoted itself as the 30th member of the NATO alliance, but at the same time received a new obstacle on the way to the EU, this time in the problem of similarities with Bulgaria. So, the Prespa Agreement regulates the difference on many levels between the two neighbors, North Macedonia and Greece, while it stands as a factor in solving the problems of similarities between the two neighbors, North Macedonia and Bulgaria. The Prespa Agreement after its signing was considered a key event in political geography, and an example of solving complicated political problems, but over time, such status of the agreement is under threat of fading, with the increase of Euroscepticism in North Macedonia and the region also, especially in conditions when North Macedonia decided on a painful compromise without getting the main goal (European Union) in return.

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