INTERVIEWS 20.06.2018

What's in a name?

Greece and Macedonia have finally ended their decades-long dispute over the latter's name. Or have they? Eva Ellereit reports

Read this interview in German.

It took over 25 years, but on 12 June 2018 Greece and Macedonia decided to make peace over an issue that has seen the latter barred from the EU and NATO. Greece's northern neighbour will now be called the Republic of North Macedonia.

The row has its roots in ancient history: Greece has a northern province called Macedonia, which is the birthplace of Alexander the Great. It has consistently defended its exclusive right over the M-word, and insisted the former Yugoslav republic's use of the name is cultural appropriation.

A new social democrat-led government in Skopje last year helped ease tensions between the two nations. As well as taking down a number of cultural symbols that offended the Greeks, Prime Minister Zoran Zaev announced he was willing to compromise on his country's name, prompting a warm response from Athens. But though both governments appear to have buried the hatchet, there are still several hurdles to jump before the agreement becomes law.

Hannes Alpen spoke to Eva Ellereit, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's director in Skopje, about the wider implications of the decision.

Greece and Macedonia have finally settled their decades-long dispute over Macedonia's name. What's the significance of this?

It means a huge amount, particularly to Macedonia. The dispute over the country's name dates back to 1991, and has been an obstacle to its entry into the EU and NATO. The two countries have now agreed that Greece's neighbour will be called the Republic of North Macedonia in future. However, the language people there speak can still be called 'Macedonian' with no prefix.

The name change is a big step for Macedonia. It even involves a change to the constitution, which is why Macedonia's holding a referendum on the agreement in the autumn. The agreement and constitution also needs to be approved by both countries' parliaments, with a two-thirds majority. Until that happens, people opposed to Macedonia's new name in both countries could still try and obstruct the agreement.

How have ordinary people in both countries responded to the agreement?

In Greece, left-wingers have tended to support the move, but there've also been some really negative, hostile reactions from a lot of people. In Macedonia there's an overwhelming sense of joy and relief. The prime minister, Zoran Zaev, says the agreement forms the basis for a 'great friendship' with Greece and a European outlook for the country.

Mixed in with this is a certain amount of scepticism: Macedonians have been waiting for this moment for 27 years and many of them refuse to believe the breakthrough's actually going to last. In the past, lawmakers have scuppered progress because they want to score political points. The opposition is making the most of this scepticism, and it's branded the treaty a climbdown. And Gjorge Ivanvov, the president of Macedonia, is refusing to sign the agreement, even if parliament approves it, because he says it gives too many concessions to Greece.

Does that mean the president could actually wreck the agreement?

The president has the right of veto after it's been ratified, but he can exercise it only once. That means he has to sign the law at the latest after its second approval by parliament – but there's no set timescale for this. He therefore has the power to block the legislation.

EU leaders have been pretty quick to express their disapproval. After Ivanov made those comments, the Bulgarian prime minister, Bojko Borisov, cancelled a meeting with him. EU Enlargement Commissioner Johannes Hahn says the European Commission will supports the agreement whether the president does or not.

In Macedonia though, the largest opposition party (VMRO-DPNME) says it will block any changes to the constitution. But if it goes the right way, the referendum will make it much harder for it to do that. It's Zaev's way of ensuring the opposition can't just reject the deal.

The stormy response in Greece culminated in a failed no-confidence

vote against prime minister Alexis Tsipras. Both governments now need all the public support they can get. They need to prove to people that this agreement is in their interests.

The Macedonian government has only been in office a year. Does popular support for the government hinge on the naming dispute?

Zaev has invested all his political capital in this question. The rigorous reforms the government has introduced over the last year, and historic agreements it's reached with Bulgaria and now Greece, are unique in the region. This has strengthened Zaev's hand in Europe, and he's using that to bolster support at home for his social democrat-led government. But lots of people are frustrated about other, everyday issues. They want to see a tangible improvement in their living conditions. The opening of EU accession talks could convince people that the changes of the past year are sustainable, giving them real prospects for the future.

Is there a realistic chance of Macedonia joining NATO and the EU in the future?

NATO's General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg has certainly suggested there is. He's called the accord 'historic' and says it could pave the way for Skopje to join NATO. There's a meeting of NATO heads of state and government on 11 and 12 July, and we should find more about whether Macedonia will be accepted as a member then.

The situation with the EU is more complex: Macedonia's been a candidate for EU membership since 2005, and the chance of it being accepted as a member is actually pretty strong. Early this year the European Commission recommended starting accession negotiations straight away. And now the naming dispute's been solved, Greece will no longer try and block Macedonia's membership of the EU.

At the same time, some member states, such as France and the Netherlands, are very reluctant to let more countries join the EU. Macedonians have also been watching Germany's struggle to form a coalition government with some disquiet.

Clearly though, this is a unique opportunity. Opening accession negotiations with Macedonia is a relatively small step for the EU, but it would have massive implications for Macedonian citizens – it would signify that Macedonia has a future, and perhaps discourage people from moving away. It would also be a sign to the whole Western Balkans region that imposing a strict reform agenda can pay dividends. But most of all, the EU would prove something to itself: the European idea is still alive and retains its appeal.



Eva Ellereit

Skopje

Eva Ellereit heads the office of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Skopje. Previously, she worked for FES in Berlin on digitisation and gender equality, later in Bonn for the state office of North Rhine-Westphalia and as Project Assistant in the FES office in Kosovo. She studied political science in Berlin and Bologna.

-