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The left's great success

Why the Prespa agreement between Greece and Macedonia is a blueprint for security in the entire Western Balkans

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The Munich Security Conference last weekend honoured the year's only real success story in European peace policy, as the Greek prime minister and his Macedonian counterpart received the Ewald von Kleist Award. With the painstakingly negotiated Prespa agreement, Alexis Tsipras and Zoran Zaev have brought to an end the decades-long dispute over the name of Macedonia. This success was made possible by two left-leaning governments, and the social democratic movement in Europe should use this to its advantage. The Prespa agreement is a shining example of what left-wing politicians in Europe can achieve.

The dispute between Athens and Skopje revolved around the legacy of Alexander the Great and the name of Macedonia. Now, after 27 years, the two countries have finally come to an agreement. The Macedonian constitution has been amended, and the country is now called the Republic of North Macedonia, a name under which it is also registered with the United Nations. The national language continues to be called Macedonian, and the constitutional amendments reject any territorial claims by North Macedonia over the Greek region of Macedonia. In exchange, Greece is withdrawing its veto on the opening of accession talks between the EU and North Macedonia, which is now also able to join Nato.

Despite populist disruption, Zaev and Tsipras achieved this agreement by redefining patriotism: only those who act in favour of peace, reliable long-term prospects for citizens and the promise of a better tomorrow should be considered patriotic. This interpretation is particularly remarkable for the Western Balkans. In a region where 'brave' politics has tended to be symbolised by sabre-rattling and stirring up historical feuds, Zaev and Tsipras have set an entirely new standard by focusing not on provocation but on cross-border cooperation and seeking mutual interests and aims.

A rare consensus

Ultimately, this is the key to security in the entire region – a security that means not merely the absence of armed force but a commitment to improving living conditions. As such, the symbolism of the agreement between Skopje and Athens cannot be overstated. The two heads of government have firmly tied their own political futures to the success of the agreement. With a clear commitment to finding solutions, they have taken this great leap in the face of internal resistance from right-wing groups fanning the flames of nationalism and the foreign powers that benefit from the status quo.

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The leaders also enjoyed the support of the EU when the time came. For once, Europe's political players found a consensus: the agreement must succeed, as it has the potential to pacify the Western Balkans for the long term and bring the region closer to the European Union. The Western Balkan nations are looking to accede to the EU and enjoy the advice and support for key reforms that will come with the initiation of accession talks.

However, the EU has its own interests when it comes to this convergence. For Europe, it is important for living conditions and economic strength in south-eastern Europe to improve, for inhabitants to enjoy credible prospects for the future, and for national boundaries to be not shifted but opened up. European foreign and security policy can and must play a part in this development. The volatile edges of the European Union cannot be surrendered to Eurosceptic populists and right-wing hard-liners.

Actions, not just words

This was recognised in the case of North Macedonia. When Zaev conducted a referendum on changing the country's name last year, he directly linked this move to the country's future within the EU and Nato. Numerous politicians travelled to Skopje in September to support him, including Nato secretary-general Jens Stoltenberg, Johannes Hahn, the European Commissioner for European neighbourhood policy and enlargement negotiations, and Federica Mogherini, high representative of the European Union for foreign affairs and security policy. They were accompanied by parliamentarians and the heads of government and

ministers of various EU states. Even chancellor Sebastian Kurz of Austria, previously known in Skopje primarily for his openness towards autocratic stabilocrats, expressed his support for the Skopje-Athens agreement.

The German chancellor, foreign minister and defence minister were among those present – indeed, it was joked that anyone wanting to meet a German minister should look in Skopje rather than Berlin. This spate of visits was intended to demonstrate a promise on the part of the European nations: we support governments that are prepared to compromise and enter into dialogue, and that are committed to a European perspective with their actions and not just their words.

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For a strategy like this to succeed, however, the European nations need to be pulling in the same direction. Contradictory signals from Brussels and the member states have led to disquiet in the Balkans on many occasions in the past and continue to do so today. The support for Zaev and Tsipras shows the EU is aware of the strategic importance of the Western Balkans. It is to be hoped that Europe will now up the ante, with the award presented to the two prime ministers in Munich showing the way forward. For too long, it has been assumed that stability means preventing violence. But security is more than the absence of violence.

In it for the long haul

Left-wing security policy in particular needs to offer more. The prevention of violence must be combined with credible prospects for the future. Anything else is the domain of populist stabilocracy. In the Western Balkans, established stabilocrats are keeping a close eye on the consequences of the much-praised agreement. Will the success turn out to be a mere poster child, or will the European states stay on the ball, even with the distraction of European elections? The social democratic movement has the opportunity to score here, as it finally has a reliable partner in the Macedonian government. And the government in Skopje welcomes the attentive eye of the EU to remind it of the need for reform and to call for sustained stability.

South-eastern Europe requires a consistent foreign and security policy with clear lines and values that are put into practice. This includes opening accession talks once the criteria have been met and conducting

these talks with transparent and strict conditions. Reform in the Western Balkans can be effected only with European support. The award for Zaev and Tsipras recognises the significance of the successful negotiations between their two nations. However, harnessing this success to achieve sustained stability that improves people's living conditions requires a commitment for the long haul, including on the part of the EU. This would also send out a strong signal to the political elite and the populations of other countries in the region.



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