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Macedonia name change agreement paves way for NATO expansion

The Macedonia name dispute has been ongoing for over a quarter century since the break-up of Yugoslavia in 1991, with Greek government claiming that use of the name by its northern neighbour reflects irredentist ambitions over the northern Greek province of Macedonia.

On June 17, Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Kotzias and his Macedonian counterpart Nikola Dimitrov signed an accord to rename the former Yugoslav Republic the “Republic of North Macedonia.” The formal ceremony took place in the presence of Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras of Syriza and Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev in the Prespes region of Greece, which borders the two countries.

In 1993, Macedonia joined the United Nations under the provisional name “Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” (FYROM). Since then, repeated attempts to resolve the dispute have stalled, with Greece vetoing Macedonia’s accession to NATO in 2008 and the European Union (EU) in 2009.

The accord is the culmination of negotiations begun following a meeting on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum in Davos in January. Behind the signing of the Macedonian agreement are wider geopolitical interests of the Western powers led by the United States, which is keen to bolster NATO’s presence in the region as part of its military expansion on Russia’s border.

Responding to the deal in a US Senate foreign policy hearing, Assistant Secretary of State for Europe Wess Mitchell, declared, “We ... expect the formal procedures in Greece and

Macedonia to be completed and that NATO will send a call for membership to Northern Macedonia at the July summit.”

That Russia was the main target was clear, with Mitchell adding, “I am worried about the protests and potential Russian interference that we saw in Montenegro. Russian predecessors have put forward the threats and I think that there is a chance that the Russians try to interfere in Macedonia.”

Following the agreement, a date was set for Macedonia to begin accession talks in June 2019 to join the EU. In an interview with *Deutsche Welle*, Macedonian Prime Minister Zaev personally thanked Chancellor Angela Merkel “for initiating the Berlin Process and for having Germany as one of the strongest supporters of this process.”

Russia’s ambassador to the EU, Vladimir Chizhov, told CNN that an expansion of NATO via the Macedonia deal would be “an effort to tackle security dangers and challenges in the 21st century with means and mechanisms from the last century. Every country, just like every citizen, certainly has the right to make mistakes, except in some cases mistakes have consequences, some of which could be severe.”

Chizhov hoped that the EU’s expansion would “not violate our good bilateral relations. For instance, forcing countries to adopt the EU’s restrictive measures against Russia.”

In an interview with Xinhua, Greek Parliament speaker Nikos Voutsis lauded the opportunities the agreement presents for China, which has extensive investments in Greece. The largest is Cosco’s concession at the port of Piraeus, an integral link in China’s supply chain trade route into Europe and part of its [One Belt One Road initiative](#):

“We are consolidating our relationship with the neighbouring country, FYROM (Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia),” Voutsis said, “through a deal that has a perspective and also helps to open the path for the Belt and Road also for trade. These moves are not coincidental.”

Far from ushering a new era of stability, the agreement can only intensify geopolitical rivalries in the region. While expressing optimism for closer Greek/Chinese relations, Voutsis stated, “I try to retain this optimism, not because there are clouds from the Greek or Chinese side, but because of what is happening on the wider map, like the looming possible trade wars. Who would have imagined that this could happen, but such issues arise between the big poles, the United States under Trump, the G7, Russia and the European Union.”

The signing of the agreement has met with bitter opposition from right-wing, nationalist and fascist forces on both sides of the border. One day before the agreement was signed,

Tsipras narrowly survived a vote of no-confidence called by the conservative opposition New Democracy (ND).

The agreement has triggered a crisis within the Syriza-led government, with Panos Kammenos, the leader of its Independent Greeks coalition partner, saying that the deal is “bad” and can only be approved through a referendum or via elections. Kammenos heads the Defence Ministry and said, “We will not allow the deal to move forward without the approval of the Greek people.”

Macedonian president and member of the conservative VMRO-DPMNE party, Gjorge Ivanov, refused to sign off on the agreement—which was ratified by the Macedonia parliament on June 20—stating, “The agreement makes Macedonia dependent on another country, in this case Greece.”

Reports suggest that Ivanov’s refusal will serve to delay rather than derail the agreement. A referendum vote is due to be held in Macedonia in September, after which the Greek parliament will vote to formally accept the deal by the end of the year.

A series of protest rallies have been held in Greek cities as well as cities in Macedonia.

Syriza Foreign Minister Kotzias downplayed the relatively small number at the protests compared [with](#) an Athens rally in February, stating, “We have gone from 1,000,000 protesters to 100,000 and now to 4,000.”

Notwithstanding the relatively low numbers involved, with Syriza’s support collapsing to 22 percent according to the latest opinion poll—14.1 percent behind ND—the protests represent a concerted effort by right-wing forces to divert popular anger against Syriza’s austerity programme into reactionary channels. The protests were called just as the Tsipras government signed a new raft of brutal austerity measures, with savage cuts set to continue for years after Greece’s current “bailout” programme with the EU is due to end in August. They are also the most high-profile indication of the mobilisation of fascistic layers and sections of the military to be deployed in future against the working class.

Prior to the no-confidence vote, Golden Dawn MP Konstantinos Barbarousis called on the army to mount a military coup against the Syriza government, as a fascist newspaper, *Makeleio*, ran a front page with doctored photos of the bloody execution, for treason, of Tsipras, Kotzias and President of the Republic Prokopis Pavlopoulos

A week before the agreement was signed, in an interview with SigmaLive.com, retired head of the armed forces General Frangkoulis Frangos called on Pavlopoulos to resign to avoid being accused of high treason. “Otherwise the government should be forced to resign,” he added, saying the opposition should call a vote of no confidence in parliament.

Frangos was cashiered in 2011 by then-Prime Minister George Papandreou, amid rumours that he was planning a coup against the social democratic PASOK government. Since then Frangos' name has been linked to initiatives to form a populist far-right party. He was also the main speaker at a large rally on Macedonia at the start of the year.

There is constant talk of creating a new political movement to the right of ND. Takis Baltakos, the former cabinet chief of staff under Antonis Samaras' 2012-15 ND administration, is the key figure working towards creating what he described in an interview on June 20 with 24/7 Radio as “the Syriza of the Right”—that is uniting all the disparate right-wing forces on the right outside of New Democracy.

Baltakos stressed that the time is ripe for a right-wing realignment, saying that “after the [name change] agreement was signed talks have intensified. There is no doubt about that.”

The deal has resulted in a further lurch to the right by ND as it attempts to prevent any further haemorrhaging of its base. A report in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* cites German government sources saying that while ND leader Kyriakos Mitsotakis has privately assured Berlin that he would not reverse any Macedonia agreement, “he now had to demonstrate opposition [to the agreement] in order not to lose the right wing of his party and prevent a party start-up on its right.”