



The Name Game

The future of EU expansion? It all depends on what the meaning of the word "Macedonia" is.

BY THOMAS MEANEY, HARRIS MYLONAS | JULY 23, 2009



The European Union is a club with a long line out the door. Just ask Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia, Albania, or Turkey. But for one Balkan country, the biggest problem is showing the right ID at the velvet rope. Seven former communist countries were able to enter both NATO and the EU by the end of the Bush years. But last year the Greek government blocked the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia from joining NATO, citing bad neighborly relations, and is determined to torpedo its EU bid as well. The reason? It's all in a name.

FYROM, perhaps due to the unwieldiness of its acronym, has tried to enter as just "Macedonia," the name of the ancient empire of Alexander the Great. But Greece also has a northern province called "Macedonia" and worries that Skopje has expansionist ambitions.

The United States supports the eastward expansion of NATO in an effort to shrink the Russian sphere of influence and -- the name issue notwithstanding -- FYROM would seem to be a perfect candidate for membership. The Obama administration can help the United Nations solve the dispute by abandoning the Bush administration policy of stubbornly backing the "Macedonians" and talk its fledgling friend into a compromise that will push it over the Balkan hump.

But doing so won't be easy. The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia understandably doesn't like to be known by its cumbersome post-Titoist tag. "Don't You FYROM Me!" is a favorite bumper sticker on the streets of Skopje. In the 1990s, foreign observers doubted the viability of this landlocked country with an explosive cultural makeup and powerful neighbors. Slav Macedonians, Ethnic Albanians, Turks, Roma, Serbians, and Bulgarians are all packed together in a state the size of Vermont. It's not surprising that such a fragile country would want to cling its oldest and most respectable heritage.

The largest minority in FYROM are Albanians, who desperately want to become members of the EU and NATO. Besides the obvious economic benefits, membership would ultimately allow these Albanians closer ties with their coethnics in the western Balkans. They are growing impatient with the recent surge in "Alexandermania" backed by the Slav majority that promotes an exclusively "Macedonian" identity for the country. Last month, the government unveiled plans to erect an \$8 million, 72-foot statue of Alexander the Great atop his horse, Bucephalus, in the capital square. Never mind that the historical Alexander's actual capital was located inside modern Greece.

More troubling are the maps in "Macedonian" textbooks that show their ancestral homeland stretching far into present-day Greece (as well as Bulgaria and Albania) and describe Thessaloniki, the capital of the northern province of Greece, as occupied territory. These are irredentist claims that justifiably worry the Greeks.

Imagine how Californians would feel if Baja California wanted to be called simply "California"? Or how Swedes would react if Norway changed its name to "Scandinavia"? The U.N.'s designated mediator has floated various possible names for FYROM, and Greece has recently indicated it would accept "The Republic of Northern Macedonia." But such a solution implies there is a "Southern Macedonia" in Greece inhabited by the same people, as in North and South Korea. But this is not the case linguistically or ethnically. A more sensible solution would be "Vardarska Makedonija," named for the river that flows through the region, which respects the dignity and

identity of Greece's northern neighbor but also distinguishes it from the northern Greek province.

It's no accident that the EU and NATO both require prospective members to have no outstanding border disputes, but the government in Skopje has exacerbated tensions with Greece. It has renamed its airport, streets, and squares after Hellenistic heroes and interferes with the internal affairs of Greece by claiming there is a "Macedonian" ethnic minority living there under duress. This week FYROM even brought a case at the International Court of Justice in Hague against Greece for blocking its NATO bid.

Where does FYROM get its chutzpah? From the United States and its allies. In 2004 the Bush administration hastily recognized the country as "the Republic of Macedonia" in return for its support of the Iraq war. It did not expect Greece actually to block an alliance with a meddlesome neighbor. Barack Obama's administration now has the opportunity to encourage FYROM to find a compromise agreeable to both parties.

The move will find support among realistic Republicans and Democrats who want to unclog the NATO bottleneck and undermine the increasing cooperation between Greece and Russia. By giving lip service to sovereignty -- Georgia -- and at other times supporting ethnic separatism -- Kosovo -- the Bush administration gave the impression that the United States will change its stance on these concepts whenever they suit its narrow strategic interests. By helping Greece and FYROM reach a mutually acceptable agreement, the Obama administration can reverse this impression, and more importantly ensure the future peace of Europe.

Like

Be the first of your friends to like this.

Save big when you **subscribe** to **FP**.

ROBERT ATANASOVSKI/AFP/Getty Images

Thomas Meaney is a doctoral candidate in history at Columbia University. Harris Mylonas is an assistant professor of political science and international affairs at George Washington University.

 **COMMENTS (15)**

SHOW COMMENTS

LOGIN OR REGISTER

REPORT ABUSE

[FOLLOW US ON TWITTER](#) | [VISIT US ON FACEBOOK](#) | [FOLLOW US ON RSS](#) | [SUBSCRIBE TO FOREIGN POLICY](#)

ABOUT FP: [MEET THE STAFF](#) | [FOREIGN EDITIONS](#) | [REPRINT PERMISSIONS](#) | [ADVERTISING](#) | [CORPORATE PROGRAMS](#) | [WRITERS' GUIDELINES](#) | [PRESS ROOM](#) | [WORK AT FP](#)
SERVICES: [SUBSCRIPTION SERVICES](#) | [ACADEMIC PROGRAM](#) | [FP ARCHIVE](#) | [REPRINT PERMISSIONS](#) | [FP REPORTS AND MERCHANDISE](#) | [SPECIAL REPORTS](#) | [BUY BACK ISSUES](#)

[PRIVACY POLICY](#) | [DISCLAIMER](#) | [CONTACT US](#)



1899 L STREET NW, SUITE 550 | WASHINGTON, DC 20036 | PHONE: 202-728-7300 | FAX: 202-728-7342
FOREIGN POLICY IS PUBLISHED BY THE SLATE GROUP, A DIVISION OF WASHINGTONPOST.NEWSWEEK INTERACTIVE, LLC
ALL CONTENTS ©2009 WASHINGTONPOST.NEWSWEEK INTERACTIVE, LLC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.