

AN INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS FORUM SPECIAL REPORT

FORUM

Visit us at www.ia-forum.org

Fall 2009

THE
BALKANS

What's in a name? Quite a lot actually

Interview with Dr. Harris Mylonas



IA-Forum: The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia asserts its right to use and be recognized by its constitutional name, the Republic of Macedonia. Why does Greece object?



Dr. Harris Mylonas: The origins of the Greek objection are historical ones. Every country has a history. Some countries' history is more recent than others. The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia is a country that entered the international system fairly recently. Greece entered it in the early 19th century. Greece has been narrating its past as running from Ancient Greece and the Hellenistic times, to Byzantium and then modern Greece. To most Greeks the use of the term "Macedonia"—the name of an ancient kingdom which was a vital component of the Hellenistic times—by Greece's northern neighbor messes with this constitutive story of Greece and seems to imply an entitlement to the entire legacy (and even geography) of historic Macedonia. In this sense it is unsettling to the Greeks.

At the same time, most of the people living in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia—if not all—have been living in a country that has been carrying this name for all of their living memory. It is unsettling for them that their southern neighbor is denying them their right to be recognized with the name they have had for decades. They are rightfully wondering: "Why does Greece object to our name now and not before?"

All of these historical sensitivities of the Greeks having to do with ancient history would not have mattered as much if it wasn't for recent history. What was generally recognized as "Macedonia" in Ottoman times was detached from the Empire and divided between Greece, Bulgaria, and Serbia in 1913 as a result of the Balkan Wars. The territory incorporated by Serbia when the larger Macedonian region was divided was initially named Southern Serbia and later on Vardarska banovina (named after the river Vardar/Axios with runs through it). During World War II, Tito decided to reshuffle the cards in Yugoslavia in order to balance the Serbian influence in the country. One of his moves was to separate Serbia from this southern region. The outcome of this move was the creation of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia within the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Greece repeatedly protested this development, but to no avail.

After the dissolution of Federal Republic of Yugoslavia the situation had changed dramatically. These events meant that the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia would become an independent state. These changes in the neighborhood scratched unhealed wounds in many Greeks from World War II as well as—and maybe most importantly—the Greek civil war. Titoist plans to annex parts of northern Greece and a sense of insecurity surfaced in people's minds. In light of this turbulent past, the use of the name "Macedonia", more than just psychologically and historically troubling to Greeks, constitutes a real long term threat of regional destabiliza-

tion because it implies there is a “Macedonia” that should be reunited, and that Greek Macedonia is not legitimately a part of Greece. Thus the constitutional name is an implicit territorial threat notwithstanding official protestations to the contrary.

If the issue continues to be unresolved—at least in the short to intermediate term—what impact do you see it having between the two countries? The region? The EU?

I don’t want to think of this scenario. The impact will be that the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia will not join the EU and that the dispute will escalate. If we add to this mix the presence of the significant ethnic Albanian minority, which is eager to see the country in NATO and the EU, then we can see how explosive things can become. The events that took place in 2001, when ethnic Albanian guerrillas and state security forces clashed, are still fresh in people’s memory.

In other words, the issue has to be resolved. Once this happens, domestic politics in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia will not be driven by this dispute and the citizens will not be responsive to popular nationalist slogans. Leaders will have to focus on the real problems of the citizens and will not be able to strategically manipulate these issues and hide their inefficiencies and corruption behind the veil of “national interest.” It is important that all of the Balkan countries enter the EU for economic, security as well as political reasons.

Are the U.N. and EU doing enough to facilitate a deal between the countries?

The U.N. negotiator, Matthew Nimetz, is trying to reach an agreement and has made some important recommendations to the parties involved. However, he can be successful only if two conditions are met: First, the external powers that are involved (primarily the U.S. and the European Union) have to realize that they should use their leverage to push actively for a compromise, not to embolden uncompromising stances. And second, the leadership and the intellectual elites in both countries have to find imaginative ways to reach this compromise respecting the dignity and historical memory of both peoples and take the domestic political risks required to achieve a solution.

Is there common ground you believe that may be reached between the countries? If so, what option (or options) would you prescribe?

What should be clear is that Greece is a member of both NATO and the EU and it has more power in this negotiation than the other party to the dispute. More than just declarations of intent will be required in order to reach compromise. Filing a case against Greece at the International Court of Justice in Hague is definitely not helping.

In the early 1990s, Greece was not ready for a compromise on this issue. Time has gone by and right now the leadership in Greece is ready for a compromise: a name with a geographic qualifier before the term “Macedonia” to be used for all purposes and not just in bilateral rela-

tions between the two countries. A name the U.N. mediator has put forward, and the Greek Government has indicated it would accept is “The Republic of Northern Macedonia.” The leadership of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia has also indicated that they want to reach a compromise and hopefully they will accept “The Republic of Northern Macedonia” as a fair compromise. Any name chosen will leave scores of people in the two countries—as well as their co-ethnics abroad—dissatisfied. However, I strongly believe that in the long run relations will normalize and the two people will coexist peacefully within the European Union.