
BREAKTHROUGH OVER 'MACEDONIA' NAME DISPUTE FINALLY IN SIGHT?

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For the past 20 years, veteran UN diplomat Matthew Nimetz has been working for a compromise in a dispute that is hard for outsiders to understand: the use of the name "Macedonia." The Republic of Macedonia declared independence under that name — anchored in the small Balkan state's constitution — in 1991, after the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Greece claims the name as well as part of its historic identity, and fears possible territorial claims on its northern province, also called Macedonia.

As Macedonia sets its sights on joining NATO, pro-European political parties in Greece have now accepted a name for its northern neighbor that would contain the term "Macedonian." But to this very day, Greece remains opposed to the name Republic of Macedonia.

Zoran Zaev open to negotiations with Athens

The two countries began UN-brokered talks in New York on Wednesday. But why should the latest negotiations bring the two sides closer to a solution than previous attempts at a compromise in recent decades?

Macedonia's new leadership in Skopje is "level-headed and interested in rapprochement," according to Greek lawmaker Spiros Danellis. The country's previous prime minister, Nikola Gruevski, was more of a nationalist, right-wing populist politician, while his Social Democratic successor, Zoran Zaev, has made it clear that he wants to rekindle the negotiations with Athens that came to a halt in 2014.

But on the Greek side, rapprochement isn't a given, as Danellis found out last week. He was misquoted after an interview implying he was not begrudging the name Republic of Macedonia. What followed were torrents of hatred from the far-right, and even open threats from his native Crete, the politician told DW, adding that he never uttered the words Republic of Macedonia and he never would.

But Greece, Danellis says, should be prepared to compromise in the upcoming talks.

Sensitive issue

UN negotiator Nimetz is optimistic. The new government in Skopje is very interested in tackling the issue, he says. "The Greek government has come to realize that a solution would benefit its foreign policies in the region," the diplomat told Greek TV this week. He also pointed out that there are no new aspects — both sides know what the other thinks. Suggestions put on the table in New

York, in other words, have been there before.

Many analysts in Greece, however, remain wary. Jorgos Tzogopoulos, of the ELIAMEP think tank, told DW he could not understand the optimism ahead of the talks as neither side is likely to back down from its fundamental position. "Gruevski's provocations are a thing of the past, but that doesn't mean his successor will simply change the country's name," he argued.

According to Athens-based Real News, Nimetz plans to submit three proposals in the naming dispute: North Macedonia, Upper Macedonia and Vardar Macedonia. The latter proposal refers to the central Macedonian river Vardar, and seems to be acceptable even to conservative Greeks because it is not reminiscent of Greek history.

The question is whether Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras' government will agree to a compromise solution. Tsipras' coalition partner, the right-wing populist ANEL party, is opposed to using the name Macedonia in any way, shape or form. ANEL leader Panos Kammenos came up with a suggestion of his own on Tuesday: the neighboring country should simply change its name to "Vardarska," without using the word "Macedonia."

"Any compromise that uses the word Macedonia would be political suicide for Kammenos," said Tzogopoulos, adding that would have repercussions for Tsipras, too. Without his coalition partner, the prime minister would no longer have a majority in parliament □ at a time when he plans to end the international economic supervision over Greece and lead the country back to the financial markets.

Vote in parliament

Nevertheless, the Greek government itself is also optimistic. Parliament had just adopted a new reform package on Tuesday when a government official told reporters that the name dispute would hopefully be settled the next time the body convened for an important vote.

The key development is that Tsipras plans to have parliament vote on a possible compromise solution, rather than putting a decision directly in the public's hands through a referendum. Presumably, he has the opposition's votes.

"A representative democracy has rules, and elected representatives must take on responsibility," said Danellis. "Parliament alone is the right place for a debate about a compromise in the name dispute."

<http://www.dw.com/en/breakthrough-over-macedonia-name-dispute-finally-in-sight/a-42185825>

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