

ANALYSIS / ICG Report “Macedonia’s Name: Breaking the Deadlock”

by Evangelos Kofos

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The Brussels-based “International Crisis Group” (ICG) issued a new report on the so-called “name dispute” between Athens and Skopje^[1]. Its alleged aim is to provide a set of proposals for the two parties to reach an agreement, thus clearing the way for “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” (FYROM) to join NATO and eventually the EU. Its reasoning is based on the assumption that the acceptance of its proposals will help avert the destabilization of the region; will compensate the Slav Macedonians for concessions to which they were coerced to make to the Albanian Macedonians; and will honor promises to Skopje (mainly by the Bush Administration) for entering NATO and eventually the EU. To construct their arguments, the authors of the report attempt to meet at some point certain Greek arguments and grievances. They criticize certain attitudes and actions emanating from Skopje which offend Greek sensitivities mainly over historical and identity issues; acknowledge the overwhelming Greek public support to current Greek government positions; and conclude by proposing, the “Republic of North Macedonia”, as a suitable name for international usage: a name that, under certain conditions, the Greek Government might be willing to consider. A basic prerequisite for Athens, however, is that the agreed name should apply “erga omnes”, i.e. for all purposes, by all.

At the same time, the authors offer to the other side a set of exclusions to the use of this name, which are likely, in the long run, to render the “international” name obsolete, similar to the currently fossilized, temporary name of “FYROM”. Moreover, the authors adopt Skopje’s escalating arguments that the resolution of the problem with the country’s name should also take into consideration and adopt the derivatives of Macedonia —i.e. “Macedonian” language, ethnicity, products etc—without any suffix, prefix or compound of terms. In the view of the ICG authors, compromise on these issues on the part of Skopje is “out of the question”

Going carefully through the report, one remains with the impression that its authors are shying away from tackling the core of the problem. Their concern is to provide a semblance of a balanced proposal simply in order to encourage international “actors” to reverse the Bucharest unanimous decision of NATO leaders^[2] and open the way for moving with FYROM’s candidacy in the EU.

Apart from the new state name, the proposal aims at “rebuilding” trust on the basis of three guidelines:

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1. ICG, “Macedonia’s Name: Breaking the Deadlock”, Europe Briefing No. 52, Pristina/Brussels, 12 Jan. 2009, 12pp.
 2. The NATO decision passed in April 2008, with President Bush consenting, provided that an invitation to Skopje “will be extended as soon as a mutually acceptable solution to the name issue has been reached”.

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» Skopje should “desist from moves ...offending Greek sensitivities about the Hellenic heritage”

» Both sides should examine treatment of their “common history of the region from ancient(sic) times to modern times”

» Pending an agreement on the name, Skopje should use the provisional name [FYROM] in multilateral forums and, in response, Greece should “drop its threat to veto Macedonia’s membership of NATO and accession negotiations with the EU”.

With trust restored, the international actors should apply “pressure” on the two parties, “especially Greece”, in order to retreat from its alleged “maximal” positions.

Comments

The ICG has been known for its well researched reports over the years. The current one, however, despite the efforts of the contributors, reveals certain serious lacunae. Originating from its headquarters in Pristina, it reveals a solid appreciation of the Albanian factor in shaping Skopje’s priorities. Nevertheless, on the “name issue” with Greece, the argument of regional instability of the early years of this decade is hardly a convincing one. Lack of sufficient and dependable information from inside Greece has compelled the authors to rely on third parties or observers in order to assess major changes that have occurred over the last decade in Greek perceptions of the problem. To summarize these perceptions:

1. The official Greek position in no way can be viewed today as a “maximal” one. With considerable cost, political elites in the country have overrun public feelings about the use of the Macedonian name by the neighboring country. The Greek government as well as all major parties, favor a compound geographical name for their neighbor country, provided its state name clearly defines Macedonian regions within its jurisdiction. The current constitutional name, however, “Macedonia”, is identical with the name of the wider geographic region “Macedonia”. Of this region, 52 per cent is Greek territory, 9 per cent Bulgarian and 1,5 per cent Albanian. UN negotiator, Matthew Nimetz, has apparently realized that such a tautology of the names for two different geographical regions could become a harbinger for expansionist claims. His latest proposal, “North Macedonia”, although tentatively might provide a way out of the current impasse, certainly is not a perfect one, as it might convey the impression of a divided country. In this reviewer’s opinion, the parties should accept the name used by the inhabitants of FYROM for their region of geographical Macedonia i.e. “Vardar Macedonia”, or preferably “Vardar Makedonija”

2. The second development was the disappointment of the Greeks over the course of the negotiations following the signing of the 1995 Interim Accord which regulated their mutual relations, minus the differences over the name. In their view, despite the fact that they extended a generous helping hand to the Slav Macedonians (economic, political, diplomatic and even military) during the 10-year duration of Accord, Skopje

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failed to contribute in finding a mutually acceptable solution to the “name issue”^[3]. On the contrary, overlooking the letter and spirit of the 1993 UN Security Council resolution of 1993, it lobbied hard to secure bilateral recognition of its constitutional name by a considerable number of states, aiming to render the UN resolution obsolete^[4].

3. The third, an even more disturbing development to Greek public opinion, particularly to the Greek Macedonians, was a re-appraisal of the ethnogenetic dogma of the “Macedonian” ethnicity. In their view, the state controlled educational system in FYROM, by extending the historical roots of the new nation to classical antiquity, was encroaching upon an illustrious past which had been recorded in the annals of Hellenic heritage, almost a millennium prior to the arrival of Slavic tribes in the region. Moreover, by claiming the entire geographic Macedonian region of modern times as their “tatkovina” (fatherland), they laid claim to everything Macedonian. As a result, the new generation of children, graduating from schools since the emergence of an independent Macedonian state, in 1991, have espoused the new dogma, which their over 45-year old elders, are at a loss to comprehend^[5].

4. With the emergence of a new generation of politicians in Skopje, belonging to the nationalist VMRO-DPMNE party, some of them, with family roots in Greek Macedonia, resurface issues and grievances dating back to the Greek Civil War of 1945-1949, apparently claiming a restitution for family sufferings. For the past two decades, the Greeks have managed to mend fences of their savage fratricidal war. Nevertheless, in FYROM, third generation descendants of the so-called “Egejski” refugees, including the current Prime Minister Gruevski, attempt to rekindle the travails of that period. The Greeks are certainly aware of the role of Tito’s Yugoslavia and more so of the nationalists of Skopje at the time, in fanning the armed conflict in Greece, aspiring in the vain to profit for themselves. By now, it is well known that the price for the Yugoslav support to the Greek communist insurrection at the time, was Greek Macedonia. To reopen old wounds, on both sides of the border, in the midst of negotiations over the “name issue” would hardly be productive.

Concluding remarks

To paraphrase slightly the ICG report, it is evident, that no matter how “mystifying to outsiders”(with partial knowledge of the issue) the dispute touches existential nerves in both Macedonia : the independent state “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” and the region of “Greek Macedonia” of the Hellenic Republic.

To resolve the dispute one has to approach with a constructive spirit the “existential” elements of both parties. It is evident that the dispute is not simply the state name of Greece’s neighbor; it is what is conveyed through it.

3. Consult, *Athens-Skopje. An Uneasy Symbiosis, (1995-2002)*, editors Ev. Kofos, Vl. Vlasidis, Museum of Macedonian Struggle and ELIAMEP, Thessaloniki/Athens, 2005, 268 pp.

4. Res. UN S/RES817/1993 stressed that the difference over the name of the state “needs to be resolved in the interest in the interest of maintaining peaceful and good-neighbourly relations in the region”.

5. Former President Kiro Gligorov was categorical that the present Makedontnsi are descendants of the first Slavic tribes which reached the region after the 6th century AD. A few years ago, cabinet ministers, in Skopje, in interviews with this writer, were complaining that they could not communicate with their teenage children, who insisted that “they were descendants of Alexander the Great”.

Skopje—and third parties offering their services for a compromise solution—need to understand that the geographical region of Macedonia, which includes the entire province of “Greek Macedonia”, is not and cannot be considered the “tatkovina” (fatherland) of the Makedonski people, living in FYROM. This is a red line for Greece and the Greeks.

Similarly, Slav Macedonians, should realize that their newly conceived ethnogenetic dogma, extending to classical antiquity, encroaches upon the Hellenic cultural heritage and the identity of their Greek neighbors to the south^[6]. As such it threatens to ignite a clash of identities in the region as a whole.

The use of the Macedonian name as a state appellation, in no way confers the right to appropriate everything and anything derived from or pertained to the entire region of Macedonia. This needs to be legally clarified and to remain binding “erga omnes”.

In the opinion of this reviewer, the task ahead is the search for enduring solutions to outstanding issues; otherwise, classical “diplomatic” escape clauses would bequest the problem to future generations.

Consequently, the following summary proposals might complement the ICG report:

- » The state name needs specifically to refer to the region of FYROM (see p.1), to apply erga omnes, in multilateral and bilateral international relations and transactions, by all organizations, states, and other non-governmental international organizations, including the government and the agencies of FYROM.
- » Its derivatives should follow the agreed state name. State identity cards, passports etc would inscribe the citizenship in accordance to the state name.
- » On issues touching upon the self-identification of persons, which includes their ethnicity, this reviewer holds the opinion that their right to self-identify themselves should be respected. This means that the name by which they identify themselves in their language –Makedontsi—should be respected in all foreign languages, including the Greek. A similar arrangement might apply to the use of Makedones for the Greek Macedonians.

6. Over 90% of the ancient Macedonian Kingdom at King Philip’s time is located within the present province of Greek Macedonia, including the ancient capitals of Aegae and Pella.

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