



ORIGINAL PAPER

The Role of Political Leaders on the Prespa Agreement

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Abstract

The relations between Macedonia and Greece have been very tense over the name dispute during the last 30 years. This political issue kept Macedonia outside the NATO alliance since 2008, when it first attempted to join, and was refused by Greece because of the name issue. The main problem consisted on the fact that Greece did not recognize Macedonia with its formal name instead, and that it should be called Former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia (FYROM). In this paper we will be analyzing the role of political leaders from both countries (Greece and Macedonia) during the Prespa Meetings and their efforts and obstacles in reaching the Agreement, which set a new page of diplomacy between Greece and Macedonia. By using different scientific methodologies such as literature review, analyses of the official text and document, as well as analyses of the media from the both countries, we are going to try to find the causes and consequences of these policies from both sides, and the impact that the international community had on the resolving the crisis. In order to reach the whole picture on the situation, we will analyze the result of the referendum regarding the name issue, the boycott of the referendum by the opposition VMRO-DPMNE, the use of nationalism for political gains and the voting on the name change on the parliament, as well as the role the Albanian community on the final outcome.

Keywords: *crisis, integration, name dispute, leaders, Macedonia.*

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The Prespa Agreement has been described by many diplomats as a diplomatic masterpiece that will go down in history because for the first time on a bilateral issue in the Balkans there was a political will to defeat nationalism on both sides. Through this agreement, Greece and North Macedonia decided to invest in friendship, cooperation and solidarity and set an example not only for the Balkans and Europe but for the whole world. But what were the reasons that made the two leaders to reach an agreement to the long lasting dispute, which created many harsh debates between politicians, academics, citizens, as well as leaders.

Based on the literature, leaders represent the most important factor in the development of a society. The development of a country's economy and society depends on their initiative and activity, their willingness and determination to move forward, even when their decisions sometimes seem to generate discontent, which can result with loss of support. Many of the problems in society today are partly the result of leadership unprepared to face the complexities of today's reality (Koleci, 2019). Modern ideas of leadership are usually based on military or previous political models. Usually a leader's skills are required in times of difficulty or when goals change or deepen. If nothing is changing, then supervision is required, and not leadership. For the last three decades, Balkan leaders have been building up their reputation among their supporters with nationalistic rhetoric, which most of the time created additional gaps between the opposite parts.

Since ancient times, political thinkers have been interested in the necessary qualities of a "good" political leader. These ideas have evolved from Plato's "philosophical kings" to Machiavelli's pragmatism (everything that comes into hand for acquiring and preserving power is acceptable), to modern theories of elite and competition developed by Italian sociologists, such as Vilfredo Pareto and Gaetano Mosca. The role of political leaders has been discussed many times in philosophy, at political science and historiography in different cultural contexts. Sociologist Max Weber, who has studied the subject in detail, is focusing in particular on the ethical dilemmas between "end-goal ethics" and "responsibility ethics" that political leaders occasionally face. The ethics of "end goals" refers to a political behavior that focuses exclusively on the ethical and moral position of the actors, without considering the consequences of political actions based on such behavior. Conversely, "responsibility ethics" considers a political decision also linked to ethical and moral consequences. Max Weber concludes that democratic political leaders should not be guided by "ethics of ultimate goals" but by ethics of responsibility. Responsive politics requires an instinct for power, a sense of responsibility and mass, but it also requires passionate dedication to self-imposed issues and personal interests, and requires charisma to be able to meet the emotional needs of supporters.

Politics is a strong and slow drilling of hard boards. It requires both passion and perspective. Of course, all historical experience confirms the truth - that mankind would not realize the possible if it did not seek the impossible. But to do so, one must be a leader, not just a leader, but a hero as well, in a maturing sense of the word. (Weber, 1919) Even those who are neither leaders nor heroes need to equip themselves with the patience of the heart, which can embolden even broken hopes. This is needed now or else people will not be able to achieve even what is possible today.

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Today, political leaders in countries in transition face continuous economic and social crises, security and political uncertainties, such as the case with Republic of North Macedonia. The political crisis has severely affected the country's economy, interethnic relation and international reputation. The stagnation of foreign direct investment is evident, since foreign investors are always looking for political stability, and insurance for their investment. One should not forget the rule of law, which according to some previous public opinion researches, is the most deserving for the situation and the complications created in the country's Euro-integration process. The judiciary in Republic of North Macedonia is seen as one of the weakest links in the country, creating disbelief and dissatisfaction among its citizens with lack of efficiency, never-ending trials and many controversial decisions, which were often seen as protective towards government officials and those in power. As a consequence, the young and educated professionals are leaving the country in a search for better salaries and security, due to lack of perspective and failure of the past governments to keep them in the country and offer them equal treatment.

The role of the international factor and their efforts to mitigate the political crisis should be also taken into account, since they play a significant role in the behavior of regional leaders, especially to the ones whose countries apply for euro-integration processes. In this context, the aim of the paper is it to identify key factors that played significant role in successfully achieving political deal between Republic of North Macedonia and Greece regarding the name issue, the further implications that came out as a result of this deal and future perspectives of the countries in the region.

Previous researches on the name issue dispute between the two Balkan countries has shown how foreign policies can change by time when there are bigger issues to deal with. In the case of Greece, different polls indicated that Greek public opinion has softened and that domestic preferences have changed. This is reflected by the fewer constraints in the government's foreign policy course in the dispute. The softening of public stance may also have to do with the emergence of other sources or events enhancing Greek national prestige, sense of distinction of feeling good and more secure. The firmly entrenched European Union course has poured in billions of Euros in subsidies enhancing overall quality of life and resolutely answering the once pressing existentialist public question of where Greece belonged culturally (Kotsouvilis, 2005). Also, the economic crisis that hit Greece during the past years has made many rightwing politicians to transit into moderate leaders, who are willing to keep their ties with countries helping Greece to overcome the negative balance figures. Their northern neighbours were also hit by several uncertainties and internal conflict, which undermined the country's efforts toward the stabilisation and economic prosperity. Finally, what seemed to be an impossible compromise between the nationalist leaders, crumbled in front of the new economic and political challenges that leaders of the both countries faced.

Chronologically, the name issue between Macedonia and Greece has undergone through several phases. The first phase persisted between 1991, when the modern Macedonian state was established, and 1995, when the Interim Accord was signed in the UN between the two states. The second phase lasted from 1995 to the 2008 NATO Summit in Bucharest that addressed the issue of NATO enlargement. Finally, the third phase is the last one which might be called the phase of denouement. (Frchkoski, 2009) In addition, it is named as a dispute over the ownership of cultural property in which each of two countries has attempted to place a trademark on what it considers to be its

name, its national emblems and its famous ancestors. Since a state's culture is as much its possession as its territory, the appropriation of this culture by another country has thus been construed as a threat to national integrity. The fundamental to agree on the very status of the contested name of the land and its people seems to be a product of the use of entirely different criteria in defining basic terms: for Greece, the word "Macedonia" and all that it symbolizes in racial and cultural continuity is the critical issue; the goal of FYROM is recognition of its ethno specificity. (Floudas, 2002)

Despite the name issue with Greece, Republic of North Macedonia faced several crises which seriously tested the foundations of the state in different dimensions. While the 2001 armed conflict appeared to be test of stability in terms of security and democratic fundamental values, the latest was a real test for the credibility of justice and the government. Publication of thousands illegal wiretapping materials linked with corruption, abuse of power and concealment of crimes by state officials, created a huge question mark on who is controlling who in the country. The opposition was determined in revealing these materials by presenting them to the media, without clearly explaining how they obtained the illegal wiretaps. In the other hand, the governing VMRO accused the opposition that was cooperating with external powers, who wanted the "patriotic" government gone.

The crisis in the country also took on a completely different dimension after the armed conflict in northern city of Kumanovo, where as a result of the operation undertaken by the Macedonian police, with the claim of carrying out an operation against an armed group which was preparing to attack several state institutions, eight policemen were killed and many others were injured, while ten members of the armed group were killed, while the rest were apprehended. Immediately after this event, several ministers, including Minister of Interior and the Director of Security and Intelligence Services resigned.

Moreover, protests in Macedonia became part of everyday life, where in Skopje for months almost every day there were protests ranging from those of students to those of the judiciary and other state employees. Two large protests took place in Skopje, with one of the opposition demanding the resignation of the government and the other supporting the government. As part of these protests, opposition supporters continued the protest for days by setting up camp in front of the government building, where in response to this, government supporters also set up camp in front of the Assembly building. This turbulent situation in the country caused the main political parties to make unexpected moves which often were seen with distrust by the citizens.

Following all these developments in Macedonia, the EU officials met with the country's political leaders to overcome the crisis, and get the government towards the EU path. The talks, mediated by the international community, were attended by the main party political leaders, who agreed to return to the parliament and not to publish wiretaps for public opinion. Moreover, they also reached agreement to appoint special prosecutors, who will investigate the officials linked with the illegal wiretapped materials, as well as to form an interim government that will take the country into early elections.

The crisis in the country resurfaced after the President, Gjorge Ivanov, using his constitutional right, decided to stop the legal proceedings initiated against the politicians in the country for resolving the political crisis in Macedonia. This decision created additional political tensions and citizens again gathered to protest Ivanov's decision, with citizens marching first to the prosecutor's office building where the investigation was

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taking place and then to the presidential office. These protests escalated and become violent, deepening the political crisis and damaging the international image of the country.

In this regard, members of the European Parliament reacted harshly to President Ivanov's decision, saying that the decision posed an additional risk to the country's stability and Euro-Atlantic integration, and called for the agreement to be respected and for elections to be held safely. Additionally, the US State Department in a statement said that the US has deep concerns about the decision taken by President Ivanov, which if implemented will protect politicians involved in crimes and will also be an obstacle to the justice that citizens of Macedonia deserve. Additionally, the statement said that this decision "will also further undermine Macedonian rule of law, the integrity of its judicial institutions, and the credibility of its leaders' commitment to the fundamental values of NATO and the European Union". (U.S. Department of State, 2016)

What seemed a steady majority for VMRO, a rightwing oriented party that was ruling the country since 2006, crumbled in front of the pressure imposed by EU and US officials, mainly because of its nationalistic and populist rhetoric, statements that were taking the country away from Euro-Atlantic integration and were provoking Greece, thus making the solution of the name dispute almost impossible. This transition was followed by the newly created Special Prosecution Office, backed by EU and US, whose main mission was to investigate the illegally obtained taped materials and bring in front of justice the involved government officials. As a result of these investigations, many VMRO officials were brought in front of the court, including the former Prime Minister of Macedonia Nikola Gruevski, who later escaped and still remains in exile.

On June 2017 Macedonia would get a new government, a government that was driven to end the name dispute with Greece and open Macedonia's path to NATO and EU integrations. The platform of the new government was a NATO and EU membership for Macedonia. The precondition for Macedonia's membership in NATO and the start of negotiations with the EU was resolving the name issue with Greece, which had been a problem that had followed the country since its independence in 1991. The new leadership of the country, determined to end this saga on behalf of the perspective of the country, agreed to a meeting between the two prime ministers of neighbouring countries for negotiating a final decision between Macedonia and Greece mediated by US special envoy Mathew Nimetz. With the help and promise of the international political factor for faster Euro-Atlantic integration of Macedonia, an agreement was reached between Greece and Macedonia, known as a Prespa Agreement. The Prespa agreement was signed on 17 June 2018 between the Prime Ministers of the two countries. As a result of this agreement, Republic of Macedonia changed its name to "Republic of North Macedonia". Upon reaching this agreement, a protocol for the country's NATO membership was initiated, which has been ratified by all member states' parliaments. On the other hand, France's blocking of the opening of EU accession negotiations restored another political crisis, since the Macedonian opposition camp now accuses the pro-reform government of current Prime Minister Zoran Zaev of being a traitor for giving up the name of the country and not fulfilling their given promises for starting accession negotiations with the EU.

If we take into account the fact that majority of the citizens in both countries were against reaching an agreement that would require compromise, the undertaken action from the both government heads was very courageous step. A poll organized by Macedonian Centre for International Cooperation and the Institute for Democracy

"Societas Civilis" Skopje (IDSCS) on 2018 showed that one in two citizens (47.1%) opposed any name change. The majority of ethnic Macedonians (59.6%) were in favor of no change, while the opinion of ethnic Albanians in the country was in favor of changing the name of the state, thus removing the only obstacle for the Euro-integration process to become reality in the country. The gap between ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians in Republic of North Macedonia was evident and expected, since the ethnic Albanians are not emotionally linked to the name issue as are their Macedonian fellow citizens. Additionally, by analyzing the result of this conducted poll we could see that 41.7% of the citizens declared that they would not vote for the party that will resolve the name dispute, while only 36% declared that they would give support to that political force. (MCIC, 2018) If we take into consideration the results from the presented poll results, which were not so different from the other polls that took place over the years regarding the name issue, taking a step forward in solving this dispute was seen as political suicide for any politician that will dare to do so.

At the end of September 2018, the Macedonian government organized a referendum in which Macedonian citizens cast their votes on whether they are for joining Euro-Atlantic integration or against. The main Macedonian opposition party (VMRO DPMNE) as well as the President of Macedonia Gjorgje Ivanov (who was elected as a VMRO candidate during the previous Presidential elections) called for boycott of the referendum. Also different anti Euro-Atlantic civil organizations with pro-Serbian and pro-Russian background organized marches against the name change.

The referendum was supported by the Prime Minister and his party (SDSM) as well by all ethnic Albanian parties in North Macedonia. Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev and the government coalition started an online campaign for a "Yes" vote in the referendum. The referendum by its nature was non-binding. The international community was also in support of the positive outcome of the Referendum, since the opposite will mean a huge blow to the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of the country and a step-back from the Prespa Agreement.

In support to the current Macedonian government, many high ranking political officials and diplomats visited the country and boosted pro-western politicians to continue towards the Euro-Atlantic integration road. Moreover, the President of Albania and the government leadership of the country urged ethnic Albanians in Macedonia to support the "Yes" vote in the upcoming referendum. This resulted with broad support of the "Yes" vote by all leaders of the ethnic Albanian in Macedonia, among which were the head of Democratic Union for Integration Ali Ahmeti and the leader of Democratic Party of Albanians Menduh Thaçi. Despite the fact that 94% of the voters voted in favor, the voter turnout was less than the 50 percent threshold required to validate the results. Both the opposition and government claimed victory, with the opposition claiming that the proposal had been rejected by virtue of the low turnout and the government argued that the result being non-binding meant the turnout requirement was irrelevant. Again, it played a huge role in determining the name change in which it showed that almost 60 percent of the population supported the name change, not including those that were outside of the country, as Macedonia has had a big problem with migration over the last couple of years.

Additionally, the Albanian political forces in North Macedonia played an essential role in taking forward the national interest of their country in all major developments. It should be noted that they were the driving force in North Macedonia that constantly asked the name issue with Greece to be solved. Maybe this was because

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they did not carry the burden of nationalism linked with the name of the country, but instead they repeatedly reflected the desire for joining Euro-Atlantic structures as their main political goal. Therefore, with a very high percentage of pro-Albanian vote in the last referendum and the historic vote in parliament for the Prespa Agreement, they made their contribution for making it possible for North Macedonia to join NATO and open negotiations with the European Union.

If we analyse the abovementioned developments, we have to give credit to the role of political leaders in reaching the Prespa agreement, which ended the 3 decade name dispute. They acted as visionary leaders, and took difficult decisions for the better future of their people, even though they were contested for the same by a large percentage of their citizens. Again, they cared less about their ratings, and took a huge step forward.

Considering this, in a recent publication regarding the negotiating process, the mediator Mathew Nimetz in his analysis said the following: “The success that was achieved in both countries, it should be acknowledged, was only possible because of effective political leadership and mobilization of support. In the opinion of many, these two young Balkan leaders set an example of long-term vision, difficult decision making under pressure, and courageous political leadership that not many global leaders seem able to achieve in our times.” (Nimetz, 2020) The agreement was hailed by world leaders as a major step for the region, noting that it was important to recognize that the Prespa Accord did not have widespread support in both countries and, as noted, barely won the required parliamentary votes and the votes of citizens in Greece and in its northern neighbour. Moreover, Members of the European Parliament nominated Prime Ministers of the both countries, Tsipras and Zaev, for the Nobel Peace Prize, stating that “The Agreement is a model for peaceful resolution of international disputes through dialogue and mutual compromise. Tsipras and Zaev showed political courage in their insistence on a dialogue despite the opposition of nationalists in both countries.”(EWB, 2019)

Resolving the name dispute with Greece and its northern neighbour has created an important new opportunity for more constructive relations and a safer Balkans. But, behind the success for closing this agreement, except for the courage of the leaders of the both countries, there are several more factors. The most relevant factor is certainly the role of the international community led by US and EU officials, followed by their shuttle diplomacy, who created an international pressure which earlier demonstrated its power and determination with the isolation and penalization of the previous government led by Gruevski, which resulted in Gruevski going to opposition even though it had won the election. The new elected government, which came to power because of the international community had to respect their opinion and acted accordingly.

Another strong reason behind this diplomatic success is the determination of the ethnic Albanian bloc behind the cause of European integration and their demand for an agreement which would pave the way for such a thing. At first glance, this does not seem to be relevant, but Albanian parties were the main factor that sent VMRO into opposition because they sided with the international community and refused to form a government with VMRO, which had won the parliamentary elections, but because it had lost international support thanks to its excessive and hostile nationalism towards Greece, it was left alone. That is why the new prime minister of North Macedonia would not jeopardize his relations with Albanian parties, as without their support he would not have been able to form a government. This is best described by the preliminary data

from the research of the mood of the citizens for the name change, which the Albanians convincingly supported it and gave wings to this idea.

The divisions of the EU member states were also reflected in its foreign policy, not giving a date for the start of talks with the Western Balkan states (Albania and North Macedonia), thus stimulating a political crisis again. In North Macedonia this will lead to the resignation of the reformist government and early elections which may result in a backward integration process.

In the end, we should not forget that the security issues, accompanied by economic and political troubles in Macedonia and Greece, made additional pressure towards the political leaders of the both countries, which resulted with closing a deal and leaving behind a long-lasting dispute that blocked opportunities, for a better and more prosperous future. Also, the nationalistic rhetoric, which gave power to populist leaders in the Balkans during the last three decades, crumbled in front of the courage and determination of the new era of political leaders, which are globally connected and oriented towards success driven formulas. Moreover, in the era of technology and information, political leaders are in the frontline of all political developments, and must act as problem-solver in order to create a better society for their citizens, a value that by time will give them the needed political support for their survivor.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Leaders represent the most important factor in the development of a society. The development of a country's economy and society depends on their initiative and activity, their willingness and determination to move forward, even when their decisions sometimes seem to generate discontent, which can result with loss of support. Many of the problems in society today are partly the result of leadership unprepared to face the complexities of today's reality.

The economic crisis that hit Greece during the past years has made many rightwing politicians to transit into moderate leaders, who are willing to keep their ties with countries helping Greece to overcome the negative balance figures. Their northern neighbours were also hit by several uncertainties and internal conflict, which undermined the country's efforts toward the stabilisation and economic prosperity.

The name dispute between the two Balkan countries has led to economic stagnation for North Macedonia, migration of educated young people and the escalation of political tensions. The Prespa Agreement has been described by many diplomats as a diplomatic masterpiece that will go down in history because for the first time on a bilateral issue in the Balkans there was a political will to defeat nationalism on both sides.

A poll organized by Macedonian Centre for International Cooperation and the Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis" Skopje (IDSCS) presented that majority of the citizens opposed any name change. Additionally, by analyzing the result of this conducted poll we could see that 41.7% of the citizens declared that they would not vote for the party that will resolve the name dispute, while only 36% declared that they would give support to that political force.

The new reformist leadership of the Republic of North Macedonia was determined to end the name issue saga on behalf of the perspective of the country. This was reached with the help and promise of the international political factor for faster Euro-Atlantic integration of Macedonia. An agreement between Greece and Macedonia was reached, known as a Prespa Agreement. Resolving the name dispute with Greece

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and its northern neighbour has created an important new opportunity for more constructive relations and a safer Balkans.

The role of political leaders in reaching the Prespa agreement, which ended the 3 decade name dispute, has to be acknowledged. They acted as visionary leaders, and took difficult decisions for the better future of their people, even though they were contested for the same by a large percentage of their citizens. Again, they cared less about their ratings, and took a huge step forward.

But, behind the success for closing this agreement, except for the leaders of the both countries there are more factors. The most relevant factor is certainly the role of the international community led by US and EU officials, followed by their shuttle diplomacy

Albanian political forces in North Macedonia played an essential role in taking forward the national interest of their country in all major developments. It should be noted that they were the driving force in North Macedonia that constantly asked the name issue with Greece to be solved. Maybe this was because they did not carry the burden of nationalism linked with the name of the country, but instead they repeatedly reflected the desire for joining Euro-Atlantic structures as their main political goal. Therefore, with a very high percentage of pro-Albanian vote in the last referendum and the historic vote in parliament for the Prespa Agreement, they made their contribution for making it possible for North Macedonia to join NATO and open negotiations with the European Union.

The divisions of the EU member states were also reflected in its foreign policy, not giving a date for the start of talks with the Western Balkan states (Albania and North Macedonia), thus stimulating further political crisis. In North Macedonia this will lead to the resignation of the reformist government and early elections which may result in a backward integration process.

The security issues, accompanied by economic and political troubles in Macedonia and Greece, made additional pressure towards the political leaders of the both countries, which resulted with closing a deal and leaving behind a long-lasting dispute that blocked opportunities, for a better and more prosperous future. Also, the nationalistic rhetoric, which gave power to populist leaders in the Balkans during the last three decades, crumbled in front of the courage and determination of the new era of political leaders, which are globally connected and oriented towards success driven formulas. Moreover, in the era of technology and information, political leaders are in the frontline of all political developments, and must act as problem-solver in order to create a better society for their citizens, a value that by time will give them the needed political support for their survivor.

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