

Prospects for resolving the name issue

NATO Parliamentary Assembly's Rose-Roth Seminar, Skopje 20.10.2010

by Dr. Evangelos Kofos

The organizers of the seminar have asked me to discuss the “Prospects for resolving the name issue”. For someone like me, a native of Macedonia, who, for half a century, has been studying the Macedonian question or being involved with contemporary Macedonian issues, it was not an easy task. For help, I turned to the Athenian philosopher Antisthenis, a contemporary and friend of Socrates: I found his advice, «*αρχή σοφίας η των ονομάτων επίσκεψις*», an appropriate way to approach our problem. In English, his dictum could be rendered as, “*the foundation of wisdom, is the definition of the names*”

The first mistake we, the contemporaries, have made in dealing with the “name issue” was to ignore his advice. And naturally we failed.

The traditional “Macedonian Question”-- traced from the last decades of the 19th century to the mid-20th century-- was a contest mainly over territories, and as such an issue of regional and international security. During the latter part of the 20th century, up to this day, it has evolved, mainly, as an issue of identities.

Claims over territories have been dealt by wars, uprisings, persistent insecurity. On the other hand, contested identities, are hard to decipher, particularly by outsiders, who tend to underestimate, or denigrate them as “incomprehensible” or “nuisances”. Thus, our failure to decipher the different identities, hidden behind identical names, was our second error.

So let us try, today, to define the various elements of the problem.

There are three groups of identities that require clear definition before proceeding to resolve the “name issue”:

- the identity of the land
- the identities of peoples connected with this land
- the identity of heritage

The first thing to keep in mind is that the term “Macedonia” defines not one but a variety of regions

---a. The first “Macedonia”--historic *Macedonia*—refers to the Macedonian kingdom in king Philip’s times ,i.e. the 4th century, b.C. Vaguely speaking, it comprised most of present day Hellenic Macedonia, plus a southern belt of the present Republika Makedonija. Over two millennia, the land of historic Macedonia, under different rulers, underwent many territorial changes. In Byzantine times, the administrative region, “Thema Makedonias”, identified mainly the Thracian regions of the empire, all the way to the Black Sea! In Ottoman times it disappeared completely as an administrative name.

---b. The name “Macedonia”, re-emerged immediately after the Balkan wars, in 1913, as “Geniki Dioikisi Makedonias” (General Administration of Macedonia), i.e. an administrative region of the Kingdom of Greece. It covered most of the historic Macedonian regions in king Philip’s time. Today it is sub-divided into three peripheries.(“Dytiki Makedonia, Kentriki Makedonia, Anatoliki Makedonia-Thraki), recognized as regions by the European Union.

---c. Thirty years later, in 1944, a second region in southern Balkans emerged, administratively identified also as “Macedonia”; it was the “People’s Republic of Macedonia”, a federative component of the PFR of Yugoslavia. It is the same region which, in late 1991, as a result of the dissolution of the Yugoslav federation, was transformed into an independent state. It is currently identified by its constitutional name, “Republika Makedonija”, and by the international temporary appellation, “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”. As such, it is referred as the *tatkovina* (fatherland) of the citizens of this country

---d. There is, however, a fourth “Macedonia”, which is projected in maps and historical literature, mainly in this country, and is generally viewed also as the “tatkovina” of the “ethnic Macedonians”. Within its “geographic and ethnic boundaries” it comprises Hellenic Macedonia, Republika Makedonija and the smaller Pirin region of Bulgaria.

Let us now turn to the second group of identities, the noun “*Macedonians*”.

- (a)“Macedonians” (*Makedones*) -- is the historic name by which the Greek-speaking people of the ancient Macedonian kingdom, identified themselves;
- (b) “Macedonians” (*Makedones*), is the regional/cultural name of the inhabitants of the Greek administrative region “Makedonia” in northern Greece.

-- (c) “Macedonians” (*Makedontsi*) is the legal appellation (citizenship) of all the citizens of Republika Makedonija

--(d) “Macedonians” (*Makedontsi*) are called the self-identified Slav- or ethnic-Macedonians (wherever they come from).

--(e) “Macedonians” (*Makedontsi*), is the regional name of ethnic Bulgarians originating from a Macedonian region

The reason I have expounded on these various *Macedonia* and *Macedonians* identities is to offer you the key to enter the labyrinth of our “name issue”. Keep in mind that each one of these names has bequeathed its own “Macedonian” derivatives to a variety of recipients. Initially, an incredible confusion emerged as to “who was what”. Soon, bitter antagonisms made their appearance on an international scale, seeking to convince outsiders that by means of their own brands of “*Macedonia/Macedonian*” they themselves were the rightful holders of the title deeds to the land, the peoples and the historical/cultural heritage of Macedonia. Contenders accuse each “other”, in harsh terms, for “usurpation” of their identity. A quick tour of dozens of sites and blogs on the Internet tells the sad story

The third group of identities refers to the Macedonian derivatives

To add to the confusion, the derivatives from the nouns *Macedonia* and *Macedonians*) are used by all kinds of “Macedonians” to describe or define a variety of identities touching on such contested issues as, Macedonian historical events and personalities, Macedonian traditions, Macedonian culture, Macedonian language, Macedonian origin, Macedonian ethnicity, Macedonian citizenship, and Macedonian products of all kinds.

Such conflicting claims lead to the question: Who are the “owners”, the “suitors” or, even the “usupers” of these identities?

As already stated, the core of the controversy over the names “*Macedonia*” and “*Macedonians*” are claims for title deeds¹ to the Macedonian land, its peoples and their historical/cultural heritage.

¹ In law, “title deed” refers a deed or document evidencing a person's legal right or title to property, especially to real property.

The Greeks, today, do not raise claims over lands outside their borders. They perceive, however, the historical and cultural heritage of the ancient Macedonian kingdom as a basic ingredient of their Hellenic identity, in the same way they view the Greek city-states of the south of classical antiquity. This explains the vast popular reaction among Greeks against the recognition of a new independent state in their neighbourhood, bearing the name “Macedonia” and using Ancient Macedonian symbols (the “Sun of Vergina”) in their national flag. Recent initiatives in this country, which have come to be known as “antiquizatsia”, certainly have embroiled the “name issue” with elements touching sensitive chords of the Greeks, particularly the Makedones.

A second issue of identity contest, with undertones of territorial claims, emerges by the extended use—particularly in schools and in government publications—of the map of a “united” Macedonia, portraying diachronically the alleged “geographical and ethnic boundaries” of the “tatkovina” of the Makedontsi. More disturbing to the Greeks is that Greek Macedonia, is referred as the “Egejski del na Makedonija pod Grcja” (the Aegean part of Macedonia *under* Greece”, (A similar treatment is reserved for the Bulgarian part which is identified as “Pirinska del na Makedonija pod Balgarija” (The Pirin part of Macedonia *under* Bulgaria). Strangely enough, the third part which in the past was identified as Vardarska Makedonija, is simply identified as Republika Makedonija. As both the map of the Republic and of the wider “geographical/ethnic” map, transcending three states, are identified as “Macedonia”, and indeed, as the “tatkovina” of the Makedontsi, the inference is clear that the two parts in Greece and Bulgaria are “unjustly” under foreign rule.

Thus, apart from the historical/cultural debate, the territorial issue, involving indirect claims to foreign lands, as conveyed to new generations of students in this country, certainly is one of the serious obstacles to a sincere and lasting rapprochement between the two countries.

Prospects for resolving the issue

I will not delve into the current efforts for finding a solution, for the simple reason that I am unaware of the current stage of diplomatic negotiations; if any. I could share with you, however, certain opinions which could show us paths for finding an exit from the problem, provided, of course, there is a will to find a solution.

Following Antisthenis advice, we have come to the conclusion that there are more than one “Macedonia” and a variety of “Macedonians”, which affect the identity of various derivatives. With strong arguments, both sides claim exclusivity of rights for their own Macedonian brands. To commence:

--Step number one: We put aside direct or indirect tactics for exclusiveness of the Macedonian name and adopt the principle of “non-monopolization”.

--Step number two: Negotiations will target at a definitive, final, not a temporary or partial solution.

--The constitutional name, which will replace the current one as well as the temporary international appellation, will use the Macedonian name; a Macedonian name with a prefix which will describe or identify clearly the region over which this country exercises legal jurisdiction (I will not venture names, but I recall that UN mediator Nimetz has referred, among others, North, Gorna, Vardarska).

-- The new state name will apply to all uses (internal, bilateral, international)

-- The legal derivatives (citizenship), naturally, will follow the state name. -

--The corresponding ethnic or regional Macedonian identities in neighbouring countries will be mutually respected. In international languages, to avoid confusion, they will be used in untransliterated form—for example, “Vardarska Makedonija”, “Elliniki Makedonia”, “makedonsko vino”, “makedonikos halvas”.

-- Similar will be the treatment of Macedonian derivatives in international use.

--The parties will respect the bona fide cultural heritage of each other and special clarifications will be made on this issue in relevant international documents.

Ladies and gentlemen:

I am not naïve to believe that such proposals will rally politicians and the public to endorse them overnight. Although my previous attempt in this direction,² was received with certain skepticism, I was encouraged by certain positive comments and suggestions, including some from this country.

This is the reason why I have accepted your kind invitation to present my personal assessment for the “prospects for a solution of the name issues”. Provided there is a will, a solution will be found. Hopefully, in my life time...

² E, Kofos, “The Current Macedonian Issue between Athens and Skopje: Is there an Option for a Breakthrough? ELIAMEP Thesis No. 3, April 2009, www.eliamep.gr/en/publications/

