

# ELIAMEP Briefing Notes

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## FYROM's EU accession hopes: A delicate balance

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### The EU's Enlargement Summit

A fresh surge of intensified diplomatic activity has recently come to shake the swampy waters in relations between Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM). The decision of the EU Foreign Affairs Council in the Brussels Enlargement Summit (December 13-14) defined a more rigorous framework for launching accession talks with FYROM without delivering a definite negotiations start date sending a mixed message to both Skopje and Athens. The EU Council adopted a non-static conclusion defining an accelerated pace to revitalize FYROM's integration with a view of reassessing progress in spring 2013. Despite the explicit reference to the country's notable reforms progress, the Council's decision acknowledged for the first time FYROM's obligation to achieve a meaningful restoration of good neighbourly relations with Bulgaria and Greece. After an explicit objection set forth by Greece and Bulgaria, reportedly backed by France, Spain, Portugal, Malta and Romania, the Council's decision alleviated pressures exerted by Commissioner Stefan Fule who insisted on giving a date to Skopje without any provision to resolve the outstanding name dispute with Greece.<sup>i</sup>

In search for Greece's consent for opening accession talks with FYROM, the Council's conclusion embraced the Greek name-related objection as an essential step for opening accession talks. In the carefully-phrased agreement text, the EU underlined that *the Council will examine implementation of reforms, as well as steps taken to promote good neighbourly relations and to reach a negotiated and mutually accepted solution to the name issue under the auspices of the UN.*<sup>ii</sup> The agreement's conclusion reiterates that *"a negotiated and mutually accepted solution to the name issue... remains essential."* Briefly, the decision suggests that *if* there is an agreed solution on the name issue by spring 2013, and *if* there are 'concrete actions and results' from high level meetings with Bulgaria until April, the goal to start accession talks with FYROM in 2013 remains alive.<sup>iii</sup>

The Greek government commended the Council's conclusion as a *quasi non son* (condition without which you cannot) for FYROM's entry negotiations and it was swiftly hailed by PM Antonis Samaras as a major positive development towards the achievement of a 'fair and sustainable' compromise.<sup>iv</sup> Speaking in Brussels, FYROM's Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski voiced his disappointment about the decision and blamed Greece for allegedly blocking FYROM's EU path while his party-fellow President Ivanov stressed his embitterment with Balkan divisions still influencing the outcomes of EU meetings.<sup>v</sup> Yet despite the seeming disappointment expressed by FYROM's top-notch politicians, the EU is apparently committed to searching for an imminent solution to break the deadlock between Skopje and Athens. However, the major issue stems from the wording of the set conclusions; for 'essential' does not of course mean *'sine qua non'*. In fact, the Council's decision has only delayed FYROM's European bid offering a fresh chance for agreeing a mutually accepted solution on the name issue prior to the launching of FYROM's accession talks. Be it as it may, the manifested rush by Commissioner Fule to integrate FYROM into the European family could well override a possible failure reaching a solution on the name dispute with Greece.

In the event of a non-agreement with Greece, it remains to be seen whether and how the EU takes the pending name dispute into FYROM's early stage negotiations. Besides, 'warning-shots' were fired prior to the Council's meeting by Stefan Fule on the appropriateness of resolving the name dispute in the early stage of the negotiation process which according to him "could create the necessary momentum for solving the dispute rather than merely addressing it."<sup>vi</sup> The setting a tighter time-framework signalled the Commission's resolve to renew efforts for entry talks in the forthcoming candidacy review session, possibly without even having a definite solution on the name dispute at hand. The Commission, and Commissioner Fule in particular, believes that keeping FYROM indefinitely in the waiting room risks further stoking dangerous ethnic tensions between the Slavic population and the Albanian minority, linking the upsurge in ethnic clashes this year to a continued lack of progress in Skopje's bid to join the EU and NATO. Unsurprisingly, this argument is similar to Skopje government's thesis.

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### Erase and Rewind

A reassessment of the capacity-expectations analogy by the Greek administration in 2007, stemming from the idea Greece being a responsible locomotive of Balkan integration and an agent of peace and development prompted Greece to adopt a critical revision to the name dispute agenda.<sup>vii</sup> The attitude of an all-out rejection over a name compromise that included the term Macedonia was formally abandoned in favour of a 'composite term' signalling a desire to formulate a more reasonable call. According to the prevailing Greek position, a compound name with a geographical qualifier for use in relations to everyone (*erga omnes*) forms an honest and mutually beneficial compromise; this is notwithstanding the fact there is in Greece and among the Greek diaspora a vocal preference for a return to the 1992 official Greek position which rejected any reference to the name Macedonia. Unsurprisingly, FYROM's formal position welcomes a mutually accepted solution on the name by considering the right for self-identification on grounds of a distinct and exclusive interpretation of ethnic 'Macedonianess'. Preserving the exclusive right of use of the term 'Macedonia' both in the name of the country and in the language and ethnicity is a key move in Skopje's strategy to safeguard their (perceived) right of self-identification, entailing the right to foster an exclusive ethnic 'Macedonian' identity. State-building, as pursued by the Skopje government, is becoming central to the sort of identity-formation that recognizes no other variation of 'Macedonianess' and usurping indiscriminately historical elements from neighbouring Bulgaria, Albania and especially Greece. Such an insidious strategy understandably creates frictions both within the country and with FYROM's neighbours.

However, after FYROM's successful recourse in the International Court of Justice in The Hague, the Interim Accord's provision for a reasonable deadline to find a solution for the problem does no longer sound very realistic in Skopje. Withdrawal from the Interim Agreement on grounds of Greece's 'disrespect and non-observation' is reportedly becoming an increasingly popular discussion topic in FYROM, no less by blaming the UN for perceived inaptitude to facilitate a solution and Greece's violation of FYROM's entry in multilateral organizations by the agreed provisional name.<sup>viii</sup> However, declaring the agreement 'null and void' undermines FYROM's legal action to enforce the rights of the agreement the ICJ, precluding thus any claim of the agreement being illegitimate. Yet the real essence of discontent lies on the nationalist perception that the Interim Accord forced a painful and unfair restriction over vital aspects of identity, including name, symbols, flags, and heritage. By contrast, FYROM has been peddling the name "Macedonia" behind Greece's back in direct violation of the signed Interim Accord, entering the UN-mediated bilateral talks without a genuine will to negotiate while campaigning internationally for the recognition of its constitutional name in an attempt to alter the arithmetic balance in the UN General Assembly to its favour. On top of this, depicting former Greek PM as Nazi officer, showing Greek Macedonian territory as occupied in school history textbooks, and reproducing irredentist narratives set a clear violation of the Interim Accord, and are certainly harmful to good neighbourly relations with Greece. The same could be argued for the historical references of the infamous project 'Skopje 2014' .

In the face of the ICJ verdict, Greece acted to revitalize the precarious relevance of the Interim Accord in order to reaffirm FYROM's engagement in the UN mediated talks on the basis and principles set in 1995. In October 2012, Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs Dimitris Avramopoulos addressed a Greek Memorandum of Understanding to FYROM calling for the active reaffirmation of the principles held in the Interim Accord (sovereignty, border-stability, non-interference, and refrain from irredentism), reassuring FYROM's commitment to a negotiated solution, and reiterating Greece's objective towards a solution that differentiates FYROM from Greece's Macedonia (Μακεδονία).<sup>ix</sup> Responding to the Greek MoU, Foreign Minister Nikola Poposki, though in evasive and non-committal terms, clarifies the importance of reaffirming to a significant extent some of the fundamentals of the 1995 Interim Accord such as inviolability of the existing borders, respect of sovereignty and territorial integrity, refraining from the threat or the use of force, non-interference in internal affairs, promotion of good-neighbourly relations and cooperation in many important fields.<sup>x</sup> But at the same time puts forward the eminence of a full respect to conditions stemming from the Interim Accord, including that of the acknowledged right of FYROM to enter international multilateral institutions under its provisional name designation. As to the continuation of UN-mediated talks, FM Poposki has emphatically reminded that talks should be processed in good faith and in a constructive manner, while respecting the democratic principles and human rights, such as respect of national identities and cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity, as well as the right of self-determination.

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### Enter Bulgaria

Greece's quest to confirm the credibility of its objections was largely reinforced by Bulgaria's formal objection to the opening of negotiations between FYROM and the EU. FYROM's traditional, though subtle and often-controversial ally, Bulgaria, in a robust leadership-like act of regional potency that few in Skopje would seriously expect, objected entry talks at a most critical phase. It was the first time since 1992, when Sofia recognised FYROM under its constitutional name, that Bulgaria potently intervened on matters related to Skopje's European aspirations. The fact that three neighbouring countries, namely EU member states Greece, Bulgaria, and EU-hopeful Albania, are critical of the politics adopted in neighbouring FYROM, reinforces the proposition that it is FYROM acting irresponsibly towards its neighbours, prompting thus for a keener and more considerate European conceptualization of the bilateral problem with Greece. Prior to the EU December Council on enlargement, Bulgaria has put forth three important conditions that FYROM should meet for its successful Euro-Atlantic integration. In a letter sent to FYROM's MoF by Bulgaria's FM Nikolaj Mladenov two weeks before the EU Brussels summit, Nikolaj Mladenov called for an agreement to reassure good neighbourly relations - based on an existing declaration of good neighbourly relations from 1999-, strengthening co-operation to improve relations in major areas and forming a high-level council that would conduct annual intergovernmental meetings.<sup>xi</sup> Yet even more crucial is the focus placed by Bulgaria on good neighbourly relations, while stressing the negative repercussions of an active anti-Bulgarian campaign that is currently taking place in FYROM. Following the conclusion of the summit, Bulgarian President Plevneliev stated, "Bulgaria cannot grant an EU certificate to the actions of the government in Skopje which is systematically employing an ideology of hate toward Bulgaria. It is high time that the government in Skopje be done with its anti-Bulgarian campaign, and the manipulation of historical facts."<sup>xii</sup> For Athens, that was a most-welcome -if surprising- development.

### Reinventing the Past

While Greek positions, shaped back in 1992, were abandoned in favour of a more flexible approach, Gruevski's administration rushed into an incredible performance of political ingenuity by revamping the controversial irredentist narratives of the early 90s. In an effort to counter Greek and Bulgarian objections, and create an identity that will not allow Albanians to identify with (claiming ownership of the state), the current nationalist VMRO-DPMNE leaders encouraged the inauguration of a linkage between the state and the historical nation, forcing the 'antiquisation' of the ethnic 'Macedonian' position through the invention of historical width and depth. This top-down nation-building process celebrates the alleged legacy of a far-distant historical past to lay the grounds for claiming dominance over the state and legitimacy over its heritage. Amidst pressures from the Albanian community for further progress on the crucial demands, namely full implementation of the Ohrid framework provisions and speedy compromise with Greece for a faster Euro-Atlantic integration, Gruevski responded by unfolding a pompous urban restoration project in the capital city Skopje ('Skopje 2014'), transforming the city centre of Skopje into a 'nation-building' laboratory. An overwhelming pantheon of Greek and Bulgarian heroes' statues depicting Alexander the Great, Phillip II, King Samuel, Goce Delchev, Jane Sandanski and others, were erected alongside a neoclassical-styled building of Caesarean-like proportions that houses the new Ministry of Foreign Affairs. A triumphal arch known as *Porta Macedonia* featuring scenes from ancient Macedonian history was erected in Pella Square,<sup>xiii</sup> adding a nasty and imitative extra to an already festering setting. This 'Blood and Soil' palingenetic ultra-nationalism is littered with murky references to ancient DNA-linkages and feeble historical associations, forcibly re-inventing the nation on its "mythical foundations", which is accompanied by a strong irredentist narrative that is criticised by many within and outside FYROM.

Yet the Slav-Macedonian opposition as well as the ethnic Albanian parties slammed Gruevski's megalomaniac monuments of alleged historical ethnic 'Macedonian' figures, stressing that the government has spent enormous sums of money on the construction of the monuments, while the country's unemployment rate is about 30%. In an opposition rally calling for early elections, leader of the 'United Opposition' Branko Crvenkovski claimed he will terminate the construction of the monuments and will direct the investments towards education, healthcare, and infrastructure.<sup>xiv</sup> FYROM's opposition leaders - former President and PM Crvenkovski and former PM Georgievski - have come together to form an alliance seeking to put an end to Gruevski's rule and demand a referendum over a proposed solution to the name dispute with Greece. The prospect of a referendum adds a counterweight to public perceptions that Crvenkovski party's SDSM is more prone towards a pragmatic compromise with Greece that would

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have allowed the country swift NATO accession and unlocking of its EU bid.<sup>xv</sup> In December 23, government-opposition tensions reached alarming heights after violent episodes inside– and outside – Skopje's parliament during the budgetary-approval voting procedure. Socialist MP's blockaded the parliament chamber to protest against what they perceived to be wasteful budgetary provisions, accusing the government for refusing to consider the proposed amendments. The protest resulted in the forceful removal of the MP's by security guards, prompting the Socialist opposition to withdraw from future parliamentary procedures and to announce the adoption of civil resistance through rallies and street-blockades in order to overthrow the government.<sup>xvi</sup> In response, PM Gruevski accused the opposition of attempting to topple down the government by force.

### Athens - Skopje...via Tetovo

Since the end of the 2001 crisis, disagreements over reforms and disputed notions of nationhood embroiled the relations between Slav Macedonians and the sizable Albanian minority, which according to the official census accounts for roughly 25% of the population while ethnic Albanian sources claim that the correct number exceeds 30%. The recent nationalist backlash risks bringing closer federal solutions as the only solutions to the inter-ethnic problems, in contrast to the unitary multiethnic state as was prescribed in the 1991 Constitution and amended by the Ohrid Framework Agreement. Albanians and Slav-Macedonians have with increasing intensity embraced debates over the national question without much success. Questions over the ownership and the kind of state that the communities wish to build remain open to the detriment of the entire region. The widening gap in interethnic relations, particularly among the young, contrasts to the functioning (or rather malfunctioning) of the liberal peace-building principles of equitability, proportionality, quotas, and the power-sharing system envisaged by the designers of Ohrid Framework Agreement. The dramatic failure to mould an all-inclusive common identity based on citizenship of FYROM, one that amalgamates the varying affiliations into one single civic sphere of existence, driven by a common system of values, has given its place to a strictly bi-ethnic division.

Interethnic relations in the country are at a most critical phase after successive outbreaks of violence between Albanians and Slavs during the course of events for the celebration of Albania's independence in Skopje. There is little doubt that ethnic Albanians are becoming less interested in the name issue while pressing the Slav Macedonian leadership to accept a compromise that would allow for a speedier EU integration. The prolonged delay to resolve the name issue with Greece, which is so far seen as the key to opening accession talks with the EU, will most probably intensify Albanian pressures. In their vast majority, ethnic Albanians are keen towards a compromise to unblock FYROM's European prospects and avoid further inter-ethnic polarisation. However, by sponsoring an anachronistic nationalist agenda, FYROM's leadership seem to be consciously, and intentionally, putting the sensitive ethnic fabric of this deeply divided society at a greater risk.

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<sup>i</sup> Andreas Rinke "Macedonia's EU talks could start without name resolution", *Reuters*, 9/11/2012. Available at: <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2012/11/09/uk-eu-macedonia-idUKBRE8A811L20121109>

<sup>ii</sup> Gerald Knaus, "Macedonia and accession: how the arguments of supporters of early accession talks prevailed", European Stability Initiative, 13/12/2012, Available at: <http://www.esiweb.org/rumeliobserver/2012/12/13/macedonia-and-the-eu-council-conclusions-a-small-but-important-step-forward/>

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid

<sup>iv</sup> "Samaras hails EU's FYROM decision", *Kathimerini*, 12/12/2012 Available at: [http://www.ekathimerini.com/4dcgi/\\_w\\_articles\\_ws1e1\\_1\\_14/12/2012\\_474581](http://www.ekathimerini.com/4dcgi/_w_articles_ws1e1_1_14/12/2012_474581)

<sup>v</sup> "ΠΓΔΜ: Αντιδράσεις για τα συμπεράσματα του Συμβουλίου υπουργών Εξωτερικών της ΕΕ", *Εφημερίδα Κερδος*, ΑΠΕ-ΑΠΜ, 12/12/2012 Available at: <http://www.kerdos.gr/default.aspx?id=1846321&nt=103> and "Ivanon Regrets EU's Failure to send a Real Message", *Macedonian Information Agency*, 18/12/2012 <http://www.mia.com.mk/en/Inside/RenderSingleNews/289/100196909>

<sup>vi</sup> Andreas Rinke "Macedonia's EU talks could start without name resolution", *Reuters*, 9/11/2012. Available at: <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2012/11/09/uk-eu-macedonia-idUKBRE8A811L20121109>

<sup>vii</sup> Article by Ambassaor (ret.) Alexandros Mallias in the FYROM magazine *Gradjanski*, available (translated ) at Defence Net: 26/11/2012, <http://www.defence-point.gr/news/?p=63865>

<sup>viii</sup> MTO Press Release No. 5 on Gruevski Speech at the UN, Available at: <http://www.macedoniantruth.org/2011/09/28/mto-inc-press-release-5-gruevskis-un-speech/>; Jankov Marusic, "Macedonia Mulls Options After World Court Ruling", *Balkan Insight*, Available at: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonia-mulls-scenarios-in-icj-case-against-greece>;

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<sup>ix</sup> Hellenic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Memorandum of Understanding to FYROM's Foreign Minister Nicola Popovski, 4/10/2012. Text Available at: <http://www.mfa.gr/en/current-affairs/news-announcements/foreign-ministry-announcement-regarding-letter-from-foreign-minister-avramopoulos-to-fyrom-foreign-minister-poposki.html>

<sup>x</sup> "Macedonian Ambassador hands over response to Greek Memorandum", 5/11/2012, Available at: <http://vlada.mk/node/4889>

<sup>xi</sup> "Bulgaria Sets Terms For Aiding Macedonia's EU Bid", *Balkan Insight*, 30/11/2012 Available at: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/bulgaria-sets-terms-for-aiding-macedonia-s-eu-bid>

<sup>xii</sup> "Bulgaria vetoes Macedonia's EU accession talks", *Euractiv*, 2/11/2012 Available at: <http://www.euractiv.com/enlargement/bulgaria-vetoes-macedonia-eu-acc-news-515809>

<sup>xiii</sup> Pella (Πέλλα) was the capital ancient Macedonia and its archaeological site is located in Greek Macedonia.

<sup>xiv</sup> "Mass Protest in Macedonia Vows to Bring Down Gruevski" *World | October 29, 2012, Topix*, 29/10/2012

<sup>xv</sup> Yet it is worth nothing that while in office Branko Crvenkovski did not demonstrate any genuine enthusiasm to come to terms with Greece.

<sup>xvi</sup> "Macedonian opposition Leaves Parliament", *B92 News*, Available at: [http://www.b92.net/eng/news/region-article.php?yyyy=2012&mm=12&dd=25&nav\\_id=83831](http://www.b92.net/eng/news/region-article.php?yyyy=2012&mm=12&dd=25&nav_id=83831)