

The Prespa Agreement one year after ratification: from enthusiasm to uncertainty?

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Introduction

In February 2019, the name Macedonia was replaced from boards in border crossings, in the Government website and the signs in various governmental buildings. The country has ever since been officially known as the Republic of North Macedonia. The Prespa Agreement entered into force following the signing of the bilateral deal between the Governments of North Macedonia and Greece in June 2018, the changes in North Macedonia's Constitution, and the ratification of the Agreement by the Greek Parliament. Greece was the first NATO member state to ratify North Macedonia's NATO Accession Protocol. The process of getting to the Prespa Agreement was wearisome, politically exhausting and at times highly controversial; but ultimately it was a process that proved successful, despite encountering opposition or even hostility on both sides.

One year after these monumental changes came into force, this report attempts a partial assessment of the actual implementation of the bilateral agreement. After an initial period of enthusiastic implementation, the failure of the European Council to start accession talks with North Macedonia in 2019 which coincided with the Greek parliamentary elections in July 2019, changed the general context, affecting the pace of implementation. The New Democracy government in Greece, while gradually adopting a more positive stance towards the agreement than the one it held when in opposition, has been much more cautious regarding implementation than its predecessors. Zoran Zaev's government in North Macedonia remains committed to the implementation of what has been its largest foreign political success which unblocked NATO and EU accession. But it has inevitably become less enthusiastic about it following the disappointments in June and especially October 2019, when the EU member states failed to reach unanimity on opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia.

The goal of this report is three-fold. Firstly, through a non-exhaustive assessment of progress to date, it attempts to identify delays in implementation of the agreement and to highlight the problems that both governments have faced. Secondly, and primarily, it analyses the internal political dynamics in both countries pertinent to the implementation of the agreement. Finally, the report analyses all the above against the backdrop of the volatile European perspective of the Western Balkans, especially following the French reservations to enlargement, which reached their climax in October 2019, and the new methodology proposed by the European Commission in early February 2020. In terms of structure, the respective socio-political contexts of North Macedonia and Greece are analysed separately. In the last section, we identify the key takeaways and recommendations.





North Macedonia – from Enthusiasm to Realpolitik

From the perspective of the political context of North Macedonia, the pace of implementation of the Prespa Agreement following its entry into force in February 2019¹ can be divided into three periods:

1. A period of enthusiasm, which lasted from February 2018 until June 2019, when the European Council failed to start accession negotiations with North Macedonia.
2. A period of political realism, from the European Council in June 2019, through the election of the new Greek government in July, to the European Council in October 2019.
3. A period of shock and disappointment refers to the period from the French “No” to start of accession negotiation until today (early February 2020).

2.1 THE NASCENT GOLDEN AGE: TIME OF ENTHUSIASM

The period of enthusiasm was characterized by strong international endorsement of the agreement coupled with extensive international media coverage. At bilateral level, the Greek and North Macedonian governments were hyperactive in terms of organizing an unprecedented number of bilateral official meetings and signing numerous memoranda and bilateral agreements in various fields in a matter of less than two months following the ratification of the Prespa Agreement. To illustrate this hyperactivity, the number of documents signed in this period surpassed the number of documents signed between the countries in the past three decades.

During the whole period following the entry of the Prespa Agreement into force, media outlets in North Macedonia in general were passive conveyers of official

messages and didn't play a major role analysing the state of the implementation of the Agreement. There were not too many stories on the successes, and there was not much focus on cross-border and people-to-people contacts. The only exceptions were events covered by NGOs analysing and monitoring the agreement. Overall, reporting on the agreement was in context of big politics and official and political dynamics. There were some negative commentaries from nationalist media outlets.

The period of enthusiasm reached its climax when Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras and his large entourage – consisting of ministers, businessmen and journalists – were given a warm welcome in Skopje in April 2019, when essentially the High Level Cooperation Council, as envisaged in Article 12.2 of the Prespa Agreement, was established. Domestic and foreign media framed the visit as historic. The Prime Ministers' selfie epitomized the nascent golden age in the bilateral relations of the two countries. The messages Prime Minister Zoran Zaev conveyed during the high-level visit focused on the economic benefits from the reconciliation with the neighbouring country, whereas the opposition leaders along with nationalistic media outlets criticized the government heavily because the national anthem was not played in front of the Government when Tsipras arrived. According to the protocol of the Government, the omission was simply because Tsipras and his delegation were late.

Tsipras's visit coincided with the campaign for the presidential elections in North Macedonia and the pre-electoral political warming up ahead of Greece's European elections. The first round of the Presidential election in North Macedonia was scheduled for 21 April 2019, while the likely second for 5 May. To appeal to voters beyond the party base, VMRO-DPMNE

decided to run with Gordana Siljanovska, a non-partisan Professor of Law from the Saint Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje. Siljanovska, whose political background has much more to do with the post-Communist/post-independence elite than with VMRO-DPMNE, has a reputation for holding moderate views on all topics except for the national ones; in the latter she has a proven track record of being a strong opponent of any policy believed to be against the national and ethnic interest of ethnic Macedonians. Siljanovska has been one of the most articulate opponents of the legislation that was supposed to benefit the ethnic Albanians, such as the Law on Territorial Organization in 2004 and the Law on Languages in 2017. Although known for her vocal opposition to the Prespa Agreement, Siljanovska's profile was much different from the usual nationalist opponents to reconciliation because of the articulate language and the legalist arguments she uses. These, undoubtedly, add a veneer of dignity and acceptability for non-nationalist voters as well.

SDSM's candidate was Stevo Pendarovski, a security expert and university professor with a reputation for being pro-European and a strong proponent of the Prespa Agreement. During the campaign the agreement was one of the central themes candidates disagreed on. Pendarovski and Blerim Reka, yet another university professor whose campaign was supported by opposition ethnic Albanian political parties, portrayed the Prespa Agreement as a path towards European integration. Siljanovska, on the other hand, was unambiguously against the agreement portraying it as unconstitutional² and promising she would "revise it using peaceful means"³.

As the first round of the election approached, Siljanovska's language became more explicit and she started using emotionally charged arguments to appeal to nationalist voters:

According to the Prespa Agreement, we will have to erase from our history textbooks the fact that Macedonians fought in the Greek civil war. The same goes for Albanians who fought for DAG (Democratic Army of Greece). Just as the Macedonians would not be able to use Macedonian toponyms in Greece, the Albanians would not be allowed to use theirs...⁴

The results of the first round of the elections surprised many, as Pendarovski's margin of victory was narrower than expected. It was achieved mostly thanks to the

disproportionately high portion of votes he received in ethnically mixed and predominantly ethnic Albanian municipalities, while losing to Siljanovska in virtually all predominantly ethnic Macedonian constituencies. The results had less to do with the dissatisfaction with the Prespa Agreement than with the growing disillusionment of centrist voters with Zaev's government which was believed to have failed to deliver on their promises related to domestic politics. By punishing Zaev's candidate, centrist voters whose support was instrumental in the societal acceptance of the Agreement sent a tactical message to PM Zaev himself for the sluggish pace of domestic reforms. Zaev's response was prompt and to the point. Once the results were made public, he announced he had received the message promising a 'purge' within the party after the elections and asking voters not to 'punish' the country by punishing his party. In the second round, the fortunes of Pendarovski significantly changed receiving almost 54% of the popular vote and becoming a president. Pendarovski's victory was interpreted by many as a signal that voters have accepted the Prespa Agreement.

During the honeymoon period, there were sporadic reactions in public discourse about the slow pace of implementation of the agreement on the Greek side. In a report titled "Macedonia on the path of implementation, Greece on the path of radicalization," *Nova Makedonija*, the oldest daily in North Macedonia, criticized the Greek state for the slow pace of implementation of its obligations and reported on the reluctance of Greek Macedonian regional authorities to change the roadmaps on which North Macedonia is labelled as "Skopje". TV Telma, a liberal national TV station, published a report titled "Greece doesn't give up the thesis that Macedonia was created by Tito," criticizing the Greek government for the republishing the Greek official position⁵ on the naming dispute on the website of the Greek Foreign ministry.⁶ Foreign Minister Nikola Dimitrov's interview for TV SKAI, in which he described the issue of the ethnic Macedonian minority in Greece as internal Greek affair also received some negative reactions in the right-wing media. This criticism was levelled amidst the highly visible and unpopular process of renaming 132 state institutions in North Macedonia.⁷

2.2 IT'S IS NOT ABOUT PERSONALITIES, IT'S IS ABOUT NATIONAL INTERESTS: POLITICAL REALISM

The second period started when at its June 2019 meeting of the European Council member states

didn't reach an agreement to open accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania. As the whole emotionally charged process of getting Prespa Agreement and the related unpopular constitutional change through parliament was legitimized with the promise that North Macedonia would quickly open accession negotiations with the EU, the disappointment was understandable. Instead of working more seriously on the management of the expectations of citizens by informing them about the French strategic reservations regarding enlargement, the Government of North Macedonia rushed to frame the failure as a technical issue related to Bundestag's inability to meet in June and make decision on enlargement. The strategy of avoiding to publicly articulate a Plan B revealed the inconsistencies in Zaev's foreign policy and eventually backfired (see more below).

The developments related to enlargement coincided with the change of dynamics in Greek internal politics. Following the SYRIZA's defeat at the Greek European Election in May 2019, then PM Tsipras announced on 26 May that early general elections would be held in Greece as soon as possible. The campaign in Greece received a lot of attention in North Macedonia and the media carefully followed developments, particularly those related to the likely winner of the elections, Kyriakos Mitsotakis. During the campaign and following Nea Demokratia's landslide victory on 7 July 2019, North Macedonia's public was being reassured by the media that Mitsotakis, despite the sometimes tough rhetoric, would remain dedicated to the implementation of Greece's obligations stemming from the Prespa Agreement and that Greece would by no means block North Macedonia's EU integration, which is a vital national interest. Following the election of Mitsotakis, the leader of the opposition in North Macedonia, Mickovski, publicly expressed his willingness to 're-negotiate' the Prespa Agreement with his Greek counterpart.⁸

Another event during the summer heavily affected the internal political dynamics. In mid-July 2019, Bojan Jovanovski, a TV personality and unofficial owner of a recently established pro-Government TV station, was arrested at the Macedonian-Greek border while trying to leave the country. The public soon learnt that the State Prosecutor is investigating Jovanovski for alleged extortion of money from Jordan Kamchev, a controversial tycoon, formerly close ally of ex-PM Gruevski and one of the most popular figures in the long list of members of the business-crime-politics

nexus investigated by the Special Prosecutor's Office. The next thing the public learnt was that Jovanovski was using his close personal ties with Katica Janeva, the Special Prosecutor, to offer Kamchev "better treatment" by SPO in the investigations against him. The details of the dealings of the trio were soon brought to the attention of the public in several illegally wire-tapped audio and video recordings, which were published by a murky Italian newspaper with alleged close ties with the illiberal international.⁹ Following public pressure, Katica Janeva, once chief of the most trusted institution in the country, was arrested at the end of August. The political damage befell on Zaev. The "Reket" (racket) case can be considered a turning point at which Zaev's popularity started descending and his political credentials fading away.

PM Zaev's domestic political difficulties did not reduce Greek expectations for strict implementation of the Prespa Agreement. Athens was particularly interested in the measures expected to be extremely unpopular in North Macedonia, in turn stimulating the rise of the right-wing and well-oiled tropes of victimization. Following the change of government in Greece, Greek diplomats pushed for more proactive implementation. Consequently, the North Macedonian government began gathering information on the status of the Sun of Vergina in public sites and public usages, an obligation stemming from Article 8.3 of the agreement, on 4 July 2019.¹⁰ Having received feedback from state institutions and municipal authorities, the Government instructed them on August 13 to start acting upon Article 8.3 - i.e. to start "removing the symbol from the Sun of Vergina from all public sites and public usage."¹¹

During Gruevski's *antiquisation* period,¹² the Vergina Sun sign was affixed on the offices of many state officials and public servants, bridges, monuments and other infrastructures. It was one of the symbols of patriotic pride the ruling party used, an act of defiance to what they saw as a Greek blackmail. Yet, it was not before August 2019 that many citizens became aware that municipal authorities under VMRO-DPMNE control had the symbol applied on manhole covers in some municipalities. In the middle of August, when the entire public attention was invested into guessing whether and/or when the Special Public Prosecutor will be detained for her role in the "Reket" case, photos of the Vergina Sun being removed from manhole covers captured the imagination of citizens.¹³

It was at this moment that implementation of the

Prespa Agreement received simultaneous negative reactions from both the left and the right of the political spectrum. The political right kept attacking it for obvious reasons related to it seeing as a betrayal of national interests and identity. The liberal-left, on the other hand, became disillusioned or at least much less enthusiastic about the agreement, because they sensed that the Government was not doing enough to address domestic problems, while excessively pleasing the Greek side and the international community with what they described as artlessly implemented relatively trivial moves. Some commenters who supported the Prespa Agreement started blaming PM Zaev and his entourage for “over-implementation” and excessive use of the new name of the country which they believed went beyond the obligation from the bilateral agreement.

In the *political realism* period which followed, the frequency and intensity of reactions to what various societal actors saw as a slow pace of implementation of the Agreement by the Greek side significantly increased. Contestation of the Agreement by the political right in North Macedonia also increased. The media reported on protests against the Agreement by the Greek far-right in Thessaloniki,¹⁴ bringing to public attention the fact that Greek PM Mitsotakis’ refusal to use the name “North Macedonia” and criticizing the Greek government for failing to change the traffic signs in Greece that were reported to still present North Macedonia as “Skopje.”¹⁵

Around Ilinden (St. Elias Day, 2 August), North Macedonia’s national holiday, the media fiercely criticized North Macedonia’s government for failing to respond to “Greco-Bulgarian denials and provocations” urging the Ministry of Foreign affairs to react to the “more and more frequent attacks and insults directed towards the Macedonian nation by the public opinion of Bulgaria and Greece.”¹⁶

2.3 MISMANAGING EXPECTATIONS, WELL MANAGING POLITICAL DAMAGE – THE PERIOD OF DISAPPOINTMENT

The third period started with unfolding of the ‘mini crisis,’ i.e. the failure of the European Council in October 2019 to reach unanimity on starting accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania, due to reservations of French President Emmanuel Macron.¹⁷ This event resulted in a widespread disappointment among North Macedonia’s public opinion and the ruling political class. Although the signals about the low likelihood for start of accession negotiation-

swere evident and received by the political elite, it was extremely difficult for a Government that has invested all its political capital in unblocking European Integration to shift its narrative. The French veto paved the way for political leaders to promptly agree on holding early elections in April 2020.¹⁸

In order to understand the logic behind this political move, we need to examine the broader context. In particular, the political thinking of the ruling political class in North Macedonia, in which the Prespa Agreement was the singular goal, subordinating all others – including justice and the economy. Amidst the rumours that started in February and March 2019 about the possibility of France delaying enlargement for a certain time, some commentators in North Macedonia pressured the government to make public possible scenarios that would take into consideration this likely predicament. Being in the middle of the Prespa honeymoon, both PM Zaev and his closest allies unambiguously refused to talk publicly about this claiming that ‘there was no Plan B.’

Careful observers would agree that PM Zaev was being honest regarding this, as his government indeed put all eggs in the basket of European Integration as a universal tool for solving all societal challenges. His strategy was based on the logic that stabilizing a small and multi-ethnic country with little developmental resources is not possible without solving the big national political issues first – given various aspects of statehood were being contested by neighbouring Greece and Bulgaria, This thinking was a complete inversion of his predecessor, former PM Nikola Gruevski’s, *modus operandi*. Gruevski was a short-term tactical player unconcerned with statecraft *per se*, believing that economic development held the universal cure for all political problems.

Although doing justice to political realism and North Macedonia’s political history, this strategy had obvious drawbacks. Most apparent was the lack of resources of a small state to ‘wage wars on many fronts.’ Zaev’s political capital and energy since coming to office was devoted almost exclusively toward foreign policy and Euro-Atlantic integration, neglecting other domestic topics that voters hold at least as dear, such as the rule of law and the improved ability of the state to administer justice and fight against the widespread culture of impunity.

The strategy was captured in the referendum question from 30 September 2018: “Do you support Macedonia’s European and NATO membership by accepting the Pre-

spa Agreement.” In other words, the referendum was not just about the Prespa Agreement, because even the voters who turned out and answered positively did not have to be necessarily enthusiastic about changing the name of their country. Rather, it was a cost-benefit calculus for most. A yes vote legitimizing a difficult (and widely perceived as unfair) decision with the promise for better living standards, stability and rule of law, which – in the political mythology of post-Yugoslav countries – are all associated with European integration.

Therefore, with Macron’s “No” in October 2019, the strategy of North Macedonia’s government imploded, while its political narrative faced the danger of being gutted amongst voters. From a cost-benefit point of view, the elections were rational and inevitable choice in order to pre-empt the resulting blame games and further disappointments.

This strategy immediately paid off, as victimization narratives usually resonate very well amongst North Macedonia’s voters. According to two separate opinion polls conducted by EUROTHINK before and right after the autumn European Council, the support for SDSM did not drop, and the one for the opposition VMRO-DPMNE did not rise. The Government did nothing to control popular expectations that it built up, yet it managed to cauterize the political fallout that resulted from dashed hopes.

Following the French no, high officials of North Macedonia did not shy away from resorting to the game Balkan politicians are very well versed at: the

game of ‘emotionally blackmailing’ their Western partners. PM Zaev’s message that the implementation of the Agreement was put at risk because “the opening and closing of [EU accession negotiation] chapters, especially the internal use of some aspects” depend on opening negotiating chapters with the EU was the most obvious example of this symbolic game.¹⁹ As we argue elsewhere in the paper, this alarmist statement generated understandable outcry in Greece, although it was not directed towards the Greek public, but rather intended to create a sense of urgency among European partners to reconsider their decisions on enlargement.

Reactions about slow pace of implementation on the Greek side became more frequent in this period. Smaller political parties from North Macedonia’s governing coalition²⁰ as well as President Pendarovski²¹ reacted that Greece had not yet changed the traffic signs and the derogatory ‘Skopia’ still remains in use.²² The Greek branding of the region Macedonia which was announced by PM Mitsotakis in Thessaloniki (see more in Section 3.4) was an event that received most negative coverage by the press in North Macedonia. The media also intensively reported on the official reaction of North Macedonia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs to this Greek move. At the beginning of January 2020, most of the press re-published the analysis of the state of implementation of the agreement in 2019 by the correspondent of the state-owned media agency in Athens. The title of the report is illustrating and speaks for itself: “Change of Government in Greece without change of position on the Prespa Agreement.”²³





The implementation of the Prespa Agreement under New Democracy government in Greece: PROGRESS, CHALLENGES, PROSPECTS

On 7 July 2019, Greece opted for political change. After more than four years of an initially hard-left SYRIZA-led government, Greek voters resoundingly decided to transfer power to the centre-right New Democracy. Exceeding expectations, the party received nearly 40 percent of popular vote, which, on the basis of the Greek electoral system, gave it the absolute majority in parliament and the ability to form a government on its own.²⁴ These elections were viewed as “Greece’s return to normality” after a decade of economic crisis and several years of SYRIZA’s populist rule. The main Greek and international debate regarding the July 2019 elections centered on the course of domestic reforms, how it will impact Greek economy, its debt and future growth, unemployment and deficit. This “return to normality”, however, could also be seen as a “return to pragmatic politics,” when it comes to centre-right New Democracy’s stance towards the Prespa Agreement and North Macedonia’s European perspective.

3.1 FIERCE OPPOSITION: NEW DEMOCRACY IN OPPOSITION AND THE PRESPA AGREEMENT

While in opposition, Kyriakos Mitsotakis led a campaign of massive opposition of the Prespa Agreement, raising the ‘patriotic stakes’ and bringing the SYRIZA-led government to the verge of collapse and the ratification of the agreement to near failure.²⁵ Some New Democracy officials excelled in nationalist rhetoric, while fewer went so far as to call the signing of the agreement a “treachery”.²⁶ Among the most vocal opponents of the agreement, New Democracy’s

Vice President Adonis Geogiadis, called its signing an enormous damage to Greece and a crime against the nation.²⁷ Mitsotakis remained more cautious in his characterizations, never reaching the point of calling the agreement treacherous. The party’s official position also was that the agreement was damaging, but not treacherous. He did not, however, shy away from calling the signing of the agreement a “national retreat” and the agreement itself as “detrimental” to Greek interests²⁸ and “shameful.”²⁹

However, the future PM’s tone was more compromising when the question came to the future of the agreement. Kyriakos Mitsotakis stressed that, as a future PM he would respect the agreement, if it is ratified. He instead promised that he would use North Macedonia’s EU accession process to amend parts of the agreement that are more detrimental to the Greek interests. While these implied a bumpier road ahead for North Macedonia’s accession negotiations, this position meant that New Democracy in principle would at least stick to the agreement itself. This manifest ambiguity helped New Democracy remain true to the more conservative and nationalist of its voters, while reassuring Western partners that it would not do anything to ‘rock the boat’ once in power.

On election day, the signing of the Prespa Agreement proved not to be the determining factor for New Democracy’s victory, which seems to have been linked to the Greeks’ broad dissatisfaction with more than four years of SYRIZA government. But New Democracy’s raising the stakes on the Prespa Agreement helped aggravate the political climate for SYRIZA. It

further consolidated New Democracy's dominance in the right-wing vote and possibly also helped the party achieve a more resounding victory in several electoral districts of Greek Macedonia.³⁰

3.2 INITIAL RELUCTANCE: NEW DEMOCRACY IN OFFICE AND THE 'HOT POTATO' OF THE PRESPA AGREEMENT

As soon as he was elected, Mitsotakis sought to improve his image as a visionary pioneer with regards to foreign policy issues and to restore his relations with Greece's Western allies, who strongly support the Prespa Agreement as a pillar of stability in the Balkan region. Mitsotakis and his government adopted a relatively moderate stance and declared that despite their objections they will seek full implementation of the agreement. This was in line with their pre-electoral clarification that they would respect the agreement if it was ratified. The newly elected government continued also to state their earlier pledge that they would do their best to improve the most detrimental provisions of the agreement, but no specific action and measure was announced to that effect.

Fittingly, Mitsotakis' choice for the post of the Foreign Minister was a center-right politician, known for his moderate political views. Nikos Dendias had stood against the anti-Prespa agreement protests,³¹ as well as against the extreme right Golden Dawn deputies inside the Parliament. This choice was indicative of the PM's intention to follow a moderate foreign policy. In fact, in one of his first foreign media interviews, Nikos Dendias has said to Bloomberg that Greek government is going to "honor any agreement" that was signed by previous administrations, including the Prespa accord, which as he said could be made "even better with common understanding" between the two countries.³²

Additionally, there has been a warm welcome by members of the new government towards the Foreign Minister of North Macedonia, Nikola Dimitrov, during the Economist conference in Athens in July 2019. Deputy Foreign Minister Miltiadis Varvitsiotis speaking at the same conference has said that the deal "leaves space through the European integration process of our neighbour to find beneficial ways of cooperation on both sides."³³

But the credentials of foreign policy moderation and some initial positive atmosphere did not do much to ease the new government's nervousness over the 'hot

potato' of the Prespa Agreement, i.e. how to implement an agreement the party actively worked against as opposition and despite the contrasting views of the vast majority of its electorate. Keeping the international-domestic equilibrium has proven a challenging task for the government and the Prime Minister.

In his first meeting with his counterpart from North Macedonia, Zoran Zaev in September 2019 in New York on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly, Mitsotakis, via a carefully worded statement, reiterated his opposition to the deal in principle. Mitsotakis appeared uncomfortable when having to refer to the neighboring country by its new name. In his talks with Zaev, he emphasized that "he would not have signed the agreement,"³⁴ while in his speech at the UNGA, he just mentioned "northern neighboring countries," preferring not to utter the still-controversial-in-Greece "North Macedonia."³⁵ Accordingly, the Greek PM's Office decided not to release photographs of the meeting with Zaev to the press or any of the official social media channels related to Kyriakos Mitsotakis. This was not the case for other bilateral meetings on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly with Balkan leaders, like Albania's Edi Rama. On the day after this meeting (25 Sept 2019), most of the Greek media chose as their main headline: "Mitsotakis: I would not have signed the Prespa Agreement."

The new Greek government's reluctance to deal with the 'hot potato' of the 'new relations' with Skopje was manifest also in the rapid deceleration in the implementation of the Prespa Agreement as well as the Action Plan signed by the two countries in April 2019.³⁶ After SYRIZA's hyperactivity and the signing of several bilateral agreements until the Greek elections,³⁷ the new Greek government signed no new primary bilateral agreements since coming to power, except a Technical Agreement on the basis of the Agreement on Defense Cooperation signed in April 2019 by the previous Greek government.³⁸

Similarly, the two main Commissions, Joint Inter-Disciplinary Committee that focuses on history, archeology & educational issues as well as the International Group of Experts on commercial names, trademarks and brand names did not meet for several months after the Greek elections. The Joint Inter-Disciplinary Committee held its latest session to date in May 2019, two months before the Greek elections. Half a year after the elections, the Greek government has still not appointed the new members who would replace those appointed by the previous government – nor has it made any

notable moves to reactivate the Commission.³⁹ This reluctance to proceed with the necessary steps to continue the work of the Commission has been received with anxiety in North Macedonia.

The media coverage of these developments in Greece has not been without problems. With few exceptions the Greek media rarely focused on the delays in implementing the Agreement on behalf of the Greek side (i.e. the change of symbols on the road signs heading from northern Greece to North Macedonia) or regarding the absence of any meetings of the two Committees (Joint Inter-Disciplinary Committee/International Group of Experts) following the July 2019 elections. However, this was not the case with regards to North Macedonia's obligation to remove the Vergina Sun symbols from public places by August 2019, as foreseen in the Prespa Agreement. There were numerous reports on this, highlighting Greek discomfort about North Macedonia's delays on that matter, which was eventually expressed as an official complaint (démarche) by the Greek government.

3.3 TURNING POINT: GREECE'S DIPLOMATIC REACTIVATION

A turning point for Greece's approach towards Skopje could be seen to be the October 2019 European Council and its decision to postpone North Macedonia and Albania's start of accession negotiations due to (primarily) French and (secondarily, for Albania only) Dutch and Danish objections. Greece supported both countries' EU hopes in the European Council. In fact, in his early comments during a press conference following the European Council, Kyriakos Mitsotakis has even said that "he will not put the Prespa Agreement's weaknesses as an obstacle to North Macedonia's European accession."⁴⁰

SYRIZA was quick to accuse the government of not showing initiative during the European Council. Former PM Alexis Tsipras also accused Mitsotakis of following the line adopted by other member states in favor of coupling North Macedonia with Albania, instead of treating the two bids separately.⁴¹ Evidently, SYRIZA opted for decoupling of the two candidate countries.

Mitsotakis' government initially kept a low profile on the issue following the European Council's decision and Emmanuel Macron's statements. The official reaction of the Greek MFA after the European Council opposed the EU's failure to give the 'green light' to the two candidates, but maintained a lukewarm language

not attuned to a country with vital interests in the continuation of the EU accession process.⁴² Greece's apparent lack of determination attracted cautious criticism by some Greek opinion makers.

Almost two weeks after the European Council, Athens got more decisively activated in support of its Western Balkan neighbours. Reportedly, Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias held a meeting with top officials to examine Greece's next moves.⁴³ According to diplomatic sources, one of the main conclusions of the meeting was that President Macron's stance undermines the Thessaloniki Agenda of 2003, which was a landmark for the EU's enlargement policy and for Greek diplomacy.⁴⁴ At the same time, Dendias has tried to be moderate in his language as a response to the nationalistic voices within his party after some members pounced on the latest developments, suggesting counter measures against North Macedonia if it breaches the Prespa Agreement, or the cancellation of the pact altogether. Addressing Parliament's Standing Committee on National Defense and Foreign Affairs, Dendias said on October 30:

*"With regards to North Macedonia, the issue for us is the complete and consistent application of the Prespa Agreement. Even when it was in opposition, New Democracy voiced its concerns regarding the problems it identified in the text of this agreement. However, as we have clearly said... once the agreement entered into force, the country is absolutely obligated to honor it. And that is what we as a Government are doing."*⁴⁵

Overall, the October 2019 European Council delivered a serious wake up call for the Greek diplomacy. On the one hand, the postponement of accession negotiations, which risked becoming indefinite if enlargement-sceptics had it their way, showed the spectre of what is at stake by delaying difficult decisions in relations with neighbours. The entire Greek policy on the Balkans is predicated on the steady and effective process of accession to the EU. The long-term fading of this prospect would jeopardise the Greek strategy in the region and would endanger vital Greek interests. On the other hand, there were also the immediate side effects of the decision of the European Council. Zoran Zaev's call for snap elections in North Macedonia, which could potentially show the exit to a government that is particularly friendly to Greece, as well as some initial statements in an interview for Euronews caused concern in Athens.

All these showed that more had to be done to inten-

sify Greek diplomacy in the region and ensure that the already volatile situation would not deteriorate further. PM Mitsotakis himself, in an unusual show of strong opposition to the French in the EU, criticized President Macron's veto and urged his European partners not to block the two countries from accession negotiations any further.⁴⁶ In addition, as part of the government's effort to bolster its Balkan role, PM Mitsotakis held a second meeting with PM Zaev in Thessaloniki on 14 November 2019. In a different mood and in a rather warmer atmosphere compared to their first meeting, the Greek Premier reportedly told his counterpart that he "could count on him" in regards to his country's European aspirations.⁴⁷

More meetings still were held by Nikos Dendias. The Greek MFA paid his first official visit to Skopje in November 2019, not long after the setback at the European Council. In his statements, he stressed that Greece is supporting North Macedonia's European perspective in order to secure stability in the Balkan region. During the visit, Dendias had his third consecutive meeting with his counterpart, Nikola Dimitrov. Additionally, Dendias organized an informal working breakfast with his EU counterparts on the sidelines of the Foreign Affairs Council, in December 2019, in which the guests of honour were North Macedonia's Nikola Dimitrov and acting Foreign Minister of Albania Gent Cakaj. The informal meeting provided an opportunity to all participants to discuss how to proceed with the enlargement debate in the wake of October's European Council.⁴⁸ Overall, and despite delayed reaction after the European Council, Greece showed signals of serious diplomatic reactivation in the Western Balkans. With a number of statements about both North Macedonia and Albania, through official visits and meetings with key Western Balkan officials, and – unusually for Greece – by siding with several EU member states in advocating a common pro-enlargement stance, Athens demonstrated a new activism in the Western Balkans and towards North Macedonia in particular.

3.4 FOREIGN POLICY BLUES: DIFFICULT RE-ADJUSTMENT AND GREEK POLICY DILEMMAS

However, the re-adjustment of policy and the new engagement with North Macedonia was not meant to be entirely smooth. On several occasions it became clear that there is still plenty of trust-building necessary between the two sides and that the signing of the Prespa Agreement alone is not enough to undo decades of hostile relations.

One such situation occurred when, at an interview after the European Council decision, PM Zaev declared that the Prespa Agreement was at risk, explaining that especially the implementation of parts of the Agreement is connected to "the opening and closing of [EU accession negotiation] chapters, especially the internal use of some aspects."⁴⁹ Zoran Zaev's statement was unnecessarily alarmist, given that the delay in North Macedonia's start of accession negotiations and, for that matter, of the implementation of certain provisions does not credibly put at risk the entire Prespa Agreement. For the latter to happen, a number of other developments need to take place, including a changing of guard in Skopje and a resolute determination of the new North Macedonian (presumably VMRO-led) government to terminate the agreement. Especially the latter, is not a highly likely scenario as long as North Macedonia remains anchored in the EU accession path. It is, after all, more than clear that Athens would swiftly return to its policy of blocking North Macedonia's accession progress should there be a government in Skopje that would directly undermine the Prespa Agreement.⁵⁰

Zaev's careless remarks sparked an outcry in Greece. Former Foreign Minister and influential opinion maker, Evangelos Venizelos raised the issue of the agreement's provision regarding the *erga omnes*, i.e. the domestic and international use of North Macedonia's name. Venizelos underlined that this provision could be undermined if North Macedonia's accession bid to the EU is indefinitely postponed, as it is linked to the opening of accession chapters.⁵¹

A careful examination of the text of the Prespa Agreement would reveal that Venizelos' statements were exaggerated. The provisions of the agreement affected by delaying the beginning of North Macedonia's EU accession negotiations are in Article 1, paragraph 10 of the agreement, which provides for the change of existing domestic documents and materials. Subparagraph b. of the same Article 1.10 foresees a "political" transitional period which "shall relate to all documents and materials exclusively for internal usage (...) the issuance of documents and materials falling under this category in accordance with Article 1.3 shall commence at the opening of each EU negotiation chapter in the relevant field, and shall be finalized within 5 years' time."⁵² There is no other provision pertaining to the country's EU accession. In addition, when it comes to newly issued internal documents, according to Article

1.9 of the agreement North Macedonia has a clear obligation to use the new name of the country. According to diplomatic sources, wherever the agreement defines the extension of the *erga omnes* use this is done in explicit terms (*expressis verbis*).⁵³ In other words, the new name should be used everywhere unless an exception is specifically stipulated in the text of the agreement.

The mini-crisis over Zaev's statements triggered renewed criticism to the Prespa Agreement within New Democracy. Some even suggested that these developments were an opportunity to annul the deal.⁵⁴ Both Dendias and former Foreign Minister Dora Bakoyannis opposed these views in Parliament. Addressing the Parliamentary Committee for Foreign Affairs and Defence, Dendias said that "for us the issue is related to full and consistent implementation of the Agreement" adding that as Prime Minister "Kyriakos Mitsotakis has said during the pre-elections period following the (agreement's) entry into force, the country is absolutely obliged to implement it." On her behalf, Bakoyannis added that "possible annulment of the Agreement could have provoked worse results."⁵⁵

The Greek media reaction to the European Council's decision and the surrounding developments was an awkward moment. Their initial reaction was quite sceptical only vis-à-vis the viability of the Prespa Agreement and not on North Macedonia's European prospects. Zaev's initial reaction to the European Council's decision, in his interview with Euronews, was enough for the Greek media to jump to the conclusion that "Zoran Zaev is backtracking". Most of the media also readily adopted the above-mentioned Evangelos Venizelos's interpretation of the Agreement's provision regarding the *erga omnes*. The headlines during those days did not help the political atmosphere, which led to renewed reactions against the Prespa Agreement.

Another incident also illustrated the complexity of relations. Shortly after Mitsotakis' meeting with Zaev in Thessaloniki, the Greek side unveiled its newly-adopted trademark for the products from Greece's Macedonia region with the motto "The GRGreat Land" and a blue-and-white logo. Mitsotakis said that "the trademark lends a common identity to all Macedonian products" and expressed his confidence that "it will be embraced by all local producers."⁵⁶ Even though Greece's adopting a trademark long before the conclusion of the works of the relevant bilateral Committee did not violate the Prespa Agreement, the move was seen in Skopje as counterproductive and not in line with the new aim of building sincere and cordial relations. The move

caught PM Zaev, who was still on visit to Thessaloniki, by surprise. He had to provide explanations to his political opponents upon his return to Skopje, even though he had not been previously informed that the Greek side would present its trademark on the same day of his visit. The Foreign Ministry of North Macedonia made a statement accusing Athens of a "unilateral move" that undermines trust between the two sides and the progress in relations achieved to date.⁵⁷

Moreover, the meager record in the implementation of the Prespa Agreement since the Greek elections also complicates the new Greek activity in the Western Balkans. Several officials in Greece, including the Prime Minister, have been asking from the government in Skopje to fully respect the agreement. But Athens itself has done little to push implementation forward. No new major bilateral agreements have been signed since July 2019. Only the Technical Agreement for the Air Policing of North Macedonia's air space by Greek military aircraft was signed in Thessaloniki on 30 September 2019, on the basis of the bilateral military cooperation agreement that was signed before the Greek elections.⁵⁸ And on 23 December 2019, Greek military aircraft for the first time started policing North Macedonia's airspace.⁵⁹

Furthermore, the very term "North Macedonia" is still not uniformly used by top government officials. The derogatory terms "Skopje" (to refer to the country North Macedonia) and "Skopjans" (to refer to ethnic Macedonians in North Macedonia) is still used by many government officials. The Greek government has also only recently gave the green light for the reactivation of the International Group of Experts on commercial names, trademarks and brand names created under the terms of the Prespa Agreement; the commission tackles the question of the commercial brands, which New Democracy had elevated to prominence during the long period of fierce opposition to the Prespa Agreement. On 20 December 2019, five months after the general elections in Greece, the Group of Experts convened in Athens.⁶⁰ Moreover, there is no progress in the Joint Inter-Disciplinary Committee that examines school textbooks, apart from media information that it will start functioning soon and that Athens will soon clarify the situation about the Greek membership in it.

Finally, it is important here to note one more factor of complication pertaining to the serious deterioration of Greece's relations with Turkey and the overall devel-

opments in the geopolitically ‘hot’ East Mediterranean. Heightened tensions with Turkey have dictated the new government’s priorities in foreign policy from day one of its coming to power. Ankara’s drilling activities within Cyprus’s Exclusive Economic Zone as well as its revisionist tactics and aggressive rhetoric against Athens has topped the agenda of Prime Minister Mitsotakis and Foreign Minister Dendias in nearly all their official visits abroad and contacts with foreign players at home. Greece was also caught by surprise in late November when Turkey signed a Maritime Jurisdictions Memorandum with the UN-backed government in Libya.

Since then, all diplomatic efforts at the highest level mainly focused on the actions that could lead to the annulment of this agreement, which according to Athens is a flagrant violation of the International Law of the Sea and could produce a *fait accompli* against Greece’s sovereign rights. In this respect, Athens has sought to further fortify its relations with countries in the wider region, such as Israel, and has signed a trilateral (Israel, Greece, Cyprus) agreement for the construction of the EastMed pipeline in January 2020. Greece has also sought to receive support from traditional allies like the United States. The issue of the Turkey–Libya agreement monopolized Mitsotakis’ January 2020 talks in Washington DC leaving little room for other issues of a common interest with the US to be raised. Under the pressure of all the above developments the issue of Greece’s possible appeal to the International Court of Justice in The Hague to solve its bilateral disputes with Turkey has been raised again in the public sphere. In this ongoing public debate surrounding Greek-Turkish relations, however, only few noted that following the Prespa Agreement, Greece no longer consumes diplomatic capital on the name dispute. At the same time, these foreign policy emergencies also demonstrate the importance of Greece continuing its efforts to resolve Balkan disputes and put the region to a steady European path.

The ongoing heightened tensions with Turkey impacted also on the Greek media coverage. There was little interest in either the political developments in North Macedonia, following the call for early elections October 2019 or in EU affairs related to the country’s European hopes (i.e. the French or the European Commission’s proposals for the negotiation strategy for future accession candidates, in February 2020). There was no particular interest either in Dendias’s visit to Skopje (November 2019) or his initiative to host an informal breakfast among his peers, with North Macedonia and

Albania’s foreign ministers as guests (December 2019) to boost the European hopes of Greece’s neighboring countries. But, interestingly, slowly but steadily, the Greek mainstream media have started using the name “North Macedonia” instead of “Skopje.”

3.5 BUMPY ROAD AHEAD? UNCERTAIN PROSPECTS AT HOME AND ABROAD

Regardless of ND’s initial reservations and the still cautious language used, the Greek government increasingly realises that, in Greece’s turbulent geopolitical environment, the Prespa Agreement is an asset to be protected, not a liability to jettison. It also becomes increasingly aware of the fact that through the strong partnership with North Macedonia it can regain some of the regional influence it has lost due to decades of unresolved diplomatic disputes and, more recently, the effects of the economic crisis. However, Greece’s taking full advantage of the Prespa Agreement potential will be inhibited by two sets of domestic and international factors.

Domestically, the first problem will be managing the anti-Prespa popular constituency. Even before the start of the negotiations for the settlement of the name dispute, in September 2016, a majority of 57% opted for entirely uncompromising position of not accepting any reference to the term “Macedonia” for the future name of their northern neighbours.⁶¹ During the negotiations that led to the Prespa Agreement, partly also due to the fierce opposition of New Democracy, the anti-compromise camp was fired up and opposition to any reference to the term “Macedonia” rose in polls to reach 71.5%.⁶² The anti-compromise stance was majority of voters across parties, but reached 81.5% among voters of New Democracy and was well above 80% among those who self-identified as centre-right and right-wing.⁶³

This mood did not change when New Democracy came to power. Even in the initial period of reluctance and cautious engagement with the Zaev government, Greek public opinion appeared unhappy with the fact that the new government did nothing to reverse the effects of the agreement. A case in point was one of the first polls measuring the public’s impression of the government’s performance which was conducted in September 2019. While the New Democracy government had an overall 70% approval rate, respondents appeared dissatisfied on only two policy areas: Migration and the Prespa Agreement. Only 24% of respon-

dents agreed with the new government's policy on the "Macedonian issue."⁶⁴

The Greek government has invested *no energy* in explaining to its voters the situation when it comes to relations with North Macedonia or to qualify its past uncompromising stance. It is, thus, difficult to fathom how this constituency, which believes in Greece's absolute right on the issue and on the unfairness of the Prespa Agreement, will change its views and allow the government more leeway to unfold its agenda of cooperation with North Macedonia. The fact that many of these initiatives of cooperation will have to unfold in Greek Macedonia, which hosts some of the most uncompromising voters adds further complication. Finally, it is in some of the Northern Greek localities that migrants and refugees from Aegean Sea islands have to be relocated, a prospect that may raise nationalist and racist temperature, with the risk of creating a potent and politically explosive mix if combined with frustration over the "Macedonian situation."

This brings us to the second domestic obstacle for the Greek government, which is the powerful intra-party faction that seems willing to use the issue in the near future for building a staunch right-wing agenda. New Democracy's victory in the July 2019 elections was too convincing – and Kyriakos Mitsotakis remains too popular – for any serious challenge to emerge for now. But this will highly likely change in the near future, as the 'honeymoon period' for the government ends and the first signs of governmental weakness or failure are bound to appear. The "Macedonian problem" is likely to offer a highly effective theme around which disgruntled or politically ambitious challengers may rally. There is after all clearly a powerful faction within New Democracy that may still be seeking ways to undermine or even annul the Prespa Agreement.

The most prominent such New Democracy official is former Prime Minister Antonis Samaras, who is the undisputed father figure of the more nationalist and right-wing faction of the party. Samaras' intentions became more than evident during the former PM's address at the 13th New Democracy party congress on 1 December 2019, in which Samaras presented what was perceived by many as a nationalist right agenda, especially on highly sensitive problems of foreign policy and migration. Samaras said that

"the political question is how we could extricate ourselves [from the agreement] without paying the cost. And

this is not easy. It cannot be done overnight – but it could be done. Because it is an agreement that hasn't got legs, either domestically or abroad, neither in the Balkans nor in Europe."

*His comments reportedly received warm applause from party delegates. The existence of populist nationalism within New Democracy is a worrying phenomenon. At present, it does not pose a risk towards Greek foreign policy, as the government still enjoys strong support from the public and the PM remains undisputed in his party. But this may change dramatically in the future, with dire consequences for relations between Greece and North Macedonia.*⁶⁵

Turning to the set of international factors, the situation may also change soon in North Macedonia, which has been under caretaker government as of 3 January 2020. Despite New Democracy's initial reluctance to engage with Zaev and his government, it is more than apparent that the latter present a much friendlier interlocutor for Greece than the unreconstructed VMRO-DPMNE. As elections in North Macedonia approach, it is clear that the electoral battle will be closely fought and the scenario of having a VMRO-led government on the day after is as likely as having the incumbent SDSM-led coalition continue its rule. A VMRO-DPMNE government, even if, as it is most likely, does not try to terminate the Prespa Agreement, will be a much less trustworthy and friendly partner to Greece. Unsurprisingly, the Greek government has shied away from commenting on the party competition in North Macedonia. And most opinion makers, consumed with developments in the relations with Turkey, do not pay particular attention to current developments in North Macedonia. But few have openly spoken of the high stakes that the April 2020 elections hold for Greece.⁶⁶

A case in point of what might the elections hold for Greece is the mini controversy generated by the VMRO-appointed Acting Labor Minister, Rashela Mizrahi, in the interim government of North Macedonia. Mizrahi ordered the replacement of the Ministry's sign with a one using the previous name of the country "Republic of Macedonia", which is a clear breach of both the Constitution and the Prespa Agreement. The move prompted strong reactions by ruling SDSM and its leader Zoran Zaev, while Nikola Dimitrov, the country's Acting Foreign Minister organized a press conference, in which strongly attacked Rashela Mizrahi and revealed that Athens has lodged a note verbale in protest of the Labour Minister's act.⁶⁷ Mizrahi in turn re-

fused to apologise and insisted in the rightfulness of her action.

In the note verbale the Greek government stated that the action of the Labor Minister “constitutes a very flagrant violation of Article 1.3 (a) and Article 1.7 of the Prespa Agreement” while reminding that the Agreement “has made possible North Macedonia’s entry to NATO and its strong candidature to open negotiations for accession to the EU with Greece’s full and active support”.⁶⁸ Interestingly, despite the move being the first serious violation of the Prespa Agreement by the government of North Macedonia and Greece’s official complaint, Athens decided not to escalate the diplomatic pressure. It seems that Greece does not want to further intervene in domestic affairs in North Macedonia, ahead of the general elections. Diplomats have admitted that many “provocative actions” may take place in the pre-election period and Athens needs to treat similar incidents with restraint.⁶⁹

Finally, the second international factor complicating Greece’s renewed engagement with North Macedonia and the Western Balkans is the ever-dimming prospects of the entire Western Balkans joining the EU in the foreseeable future. The so-called Europeanisation of the entire Balkans has been the cornerstone of Greek foreign policy for more than two decades. Athens did a lot to promote the European perspective of the region, most notably through the iconic Thessaloniki Summit of the Greek EU Presidency of 2003. Previously, this policy had a strong element of ambivalence, due to Greece’s multiple disputes with neighbours.⁷⁰ But as Greece demonstrates stronger impulse to resolve disputes with neighbours and, thereby, make its enlargement priority more credible, so the broader appetite for new memberships is decreasing in other EU countries.

The latest manifestation of this trend is, as we have seen above, the failure of the European Council to offer North Macedonia and Albania a date for the start of accession negotiations. The strong cooperation and partnership between Greece and North Macedonia that may be built around the positive agenda of the Prespa Agreement requires a mollifying political atmosphere that can be more effectively advanced if the entire region maintains realistic prospects for EU accession. In contrast, leaving the Western Balkans ‘out in the cold’ will inevitably increase the geopolitical pressures in the broader region, further inflame great power politics and possibly even extend the zone of instability from the MENA region to the Balkans.

In that context, the Greek government is intensifying its efforts to re-consolidate the EU accession of path of the Western Balkans. In order to boost the European perspective of Albania and North Macedonia Greece plans to host a special Summit in Thessaloniki, in late February with the participation of certain EU countries and representatives of the 6 Western Balkan countries. The main aim is to push for a date for the beginning of accession talks during the March 2020 European Council. Diplomatic sources are optimistic that France could be more keen to change its mind, especially after the new accession methodology presented by the European Commission.⁷¹ The new methodology, that streamlines a negotiation strategy for future accessions, also includes a provision of a “delay or break off entirely, negotiations with countries that lack progress on reform”,⁷² which was demanded by France. The Summit in Thessaloniki will take place just 40 days before elections in North Macedonia. It seems that if a positive decision for Skopje could be made in the March 2020 European Council it would be of a notable benefit to Zoran Zaev and his hopes to get re-elected. One could assume that the Greek side would be pleased with this scenario on the basis that this could definitely secure the smoother implementation of the Prespa Agreement.





Conclusions and key takeaways

1. The Prespa Agreement ended the 27 year long name dispute between North Macedonia and Greece, renaming the former country as the Republic of North Macedonia, in exchange for NATO admission and a start to EU accession talks.⁷³ The initial period of enthusiasm about the implementation of the Agreement was characterized by strong international endorsement and extensive international media coverage. During this period, both governments organised an unprecedented number of bilateral meetings and signed memoranda and bilateral agreements in various fields in a matter of less than two months following the ratification of the Agreement.

2. Despite the Agreement sending positive messages of compromise, cooperation and strong desire for European integration coming from the Western Balkans⁷⁴, the implementation was met with public opposition on both ends. In North Macedonia, the public criticized the slow pace of implementation of the Agreement on the Greek side. Additionally, the internal political turmoil in North Macedonia in the summer of 2019 contributed to negative perception of the implementation. The political right attacked the Agreement claiming that it represents treason to national interests. The liberal-left, on the other hand, became less enthusiastic about the agreement because it sensed that the Government was not addressing its domestic problems first. They noted that the government was excessively trying to accommodate the Greek and international community by being overly selective on which sections of the Agreement it was implementing. In October 2019, the French veto to commence accession negotiations with North Macedonia, further prompted frustration about the implementation of the Agreement.

3. The re-adjustment of the new government in Greece in terms of its policy and the new engagement with North Macedonia has not been entirely smooth; on the contrary, the New Democracy government has been quite nervous and awkward in many occasions including high level bilateral meetings and most importantly, in terms of the implementation of the Prespa Agreement. There have been numerous postponements and delays in certain areas like the appointment of new members of the Inter-Disciplinary Committee for the textbooks as well as the reactivation of the International Group of Experts on commercial names, trademarks etc.

4. The Greek government -while consumed with other high profile diplomatic and domestic problems like migration and heightened tensions with Turkey- and despite the still unpopular sentiment of the majority of Greeks towards the Agreement, however, is engaged in several initiatives aiming to push forward North Macedonia's European hopes. There are two main possible reasons for this: Firstly, Greece has realized that it doesn't have to consume any more diplomatic capital on yet another unresolved issue, while facing problems with Turkey. Secondly, this diplomatic achievement of the Prespa Agreement may be enough reason for Greece to seek a new role after a decade long absence in the wider Balkan region politically and economically. On the domestic front, the existence of a populist nationalist wing within New Democracy is a worrying phenomenon. It does not present for the time being any risk for the government's foreign policy, as the centrist Greek Prime Minister still enjoys strong support from the public. It could, however, be the cause of more problems when the government's honeymoon period ends.

5. The Greek government has avoided so far explaining in detail to the domestic audience the reasons why it warmly supports the European perspectives of its neighboring countries namely Albania and North Macedonia. One possible reason is that this issue is not high on the domestic agenda and thus, there is no real interest by the public. But eventually, the government in Athens will have to find a communications strategy to explain mainly to its voters both the situation with regards to relations with North Macedonia as well as the need of the implementation of the Prespa Agreement. It would be quite a challenging task taking into consideration that even the SYRIZA government, which signed the Agreement, had not been able to thoroughly and successfully explain to the public neither the provisions nor the positive agenda of the Prespa Agreement.

6. Postponing EU accession talks for North Macedonia is problematic due to the indirect linkage between the implementation of the Agreement and the progress of the EU negotiation process. Despite the implementation of the Prespa Agreement continuing on a relatively stable and progressive path, it remains vitally important for the EU to monitor its progress in order to ensure conformity and adherence to the cooperative spirit that underpins the Agreement.

7. In order to ensure that positive sentiment towards the EU and the overall accession process continues, the EU should utilise the momentum in the forthcoming year to formally commence North Macedonia's accession negotiations. Continued delay is likely to weaken pro-EU political willpower in the country, while also laying bear the weaknesses in the implementation of the Prespa Agreement.





Appendix List of Official Documents Signed

1. “Final Agreement for the settlement of the differences as described in the United Nations Security Council Resolutions 817 (1993) and 845 (1993), the termination of the Interim Accord of 1995, and the establishment of a strategic partnership between the parties” (agreed 12 June 2018, signed Prespa, June 17)?

2. “Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministry of Digital Policy, Telecommunications and Media of the Hellenic Republic and the Ministry of Information Society and Administration of the Republic of North Macedonia on Reduction of International Roaming Tariffs for Telecommunication Services”, 19 February 2019

3. “Agreement between the Hellenic Republic and the Republic of North Macedonia on the Establishment of one Border-Crossing point in the Prespa Lake Area”, Skopje, 8 March 2019.

4. “Action Plan on the intensification and enrichment of cooperation between the Hellenic Republic and the Republic of North Macedonia as provided for in the Prespa Agreement”, Skopje, 2 April 2019

5. “Agreement on Defense Cooperation between the Ministry of National Defence of the Hellenic Republic and the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of North Macedonia”, Skopje, 2 April 2019

6. “Memorandum of Cooperation between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Hellenic Republic and the Secretariat for European Affairs of the Republic of North Macedonia on the Acceleration of the Integration Process of the Republic of North Macedonia into the European Union”, Skopje, 2 April 2019

7. “Memorandum of Understanding on the development of the “Thessaloniki- Skopje-Tabanovce”

Road and Railway Connection between the Hellenic Republic and the Republic of North Macedonia (“Road and Rail Project””, Skopje, 2 April 2019

8. “Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the Hellenic Republic and the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia concerning the establishment of a Steering Committee for Economic Cooperation”, Skopje, 2 April 2019

9. “Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation between the Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport of the Hellenic Republic and the Ministry of Transport and Communication of the Republic of North Macedonia”, Skopje, 2 April 2019

10. “Agreement between the Hellenic Republic and the Republic of North Macedonia on the establishment of a new Border-Crossing Point between the two countries, connecting Promachoi, in the Hellenic Republic and Majden, in the Republic of North Macedonia”, Skopje, 2 April 2019.

11. Establishment of a Greek Embassy in Skopje and an Embassy of the Republic of North Macedonia in Athens, as well as of the General Consulates of Greece and North Macedonia in Bitola and Thessaloniki respectively, 31st May 2019.

12. Technical Agreement, within the framework of the Agreement of Defense Cooperation signed in April 2019, on the Air Policing of North Macedonia’s air space by the Greek Air Force, Thessaloniki, 30 September 2019.

13. Agreement in principle on the text of the Rules of Operation and Procedure of the Joint Experts Committee on the Establishment of one Border-Crossing Point in the Prespa Lake Area, Skopje, January 31st 2020.



Endnotes

¹ The Agreement entered into force with the ratification of the NATO accession protocol of North Macedonia by the Hellenic Parliament.

² [За Пендаровски и Река Преспанскиот договор е патот кон ЕУ и НАТО, за Силјановска е против уставен](#)

³ [Силјановска: Ќе се обидам по мирен пат да го ревидирам Договорот со Грција](#)

⁴ <https://plusinfo.mk/%d1%81%d0%b8%d0%b%d1%98%d0%b0%d0%b-d%d0%be%d0%b2%d1%81%d0%ba%d0%b0-%d1%9c%d0%b5-%d1%82%d1%80%d0%b5%d0%b1%d0%b0-%d0%b4%d0%b0-%d0%b8%d0%b7%d0%b1-%d1%80%d0%b8%d1%88%d0%b5%d0%bc%d0%b5-%d0%be%d0%b4-%d1%83/>

⁵ <https://www.mfa.gr/en/the-question-of-the-name-of-the-republic-of-north/>

⁶ [Грција не се откажува од тезата за Македонија создадена од Тито](#)

⁷ <https://www.novamakedonija.com.mk/makedonija/politika/%D0%B4%D0%B0%D0%B%D0%B8-%D1%81%D0%BF%D0%B8%D1%81%D0%BE%D0%BA%D0%BE%D1%82-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%B8%D0%B%D0%B5%D0%BD%D1%83%D0%B2%D0%B0%D1%9A%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B0-%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%B3/>

⁸ [Мицкоски: Подготвен сум да репреговарам за Преспанскиот договор](#)

⁹ https://www.dw.com/mk/%D0%BB%D0%B0-%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%82%

[%D0%B0-%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%BA%D0%BE-%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%BA%D0%B5%D1%82-%D1%81%D0%B5-%D0%B-D%D0%B0%D1%98%D0%B4%D0%B5-%D0%B2%D0%BE-%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%B-D%D0%B8%D1%98%D0%B0%D0%BD%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8-%D0%B4%D0%B5%D1%81%D0%B-D%D0%B8%D1%87%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8-%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%81%D0%B-D%D0%B8%D0%BA/a-49942605](#)

¹⁰ 8.3 of the Prespa Agreement: The Second Party shall not use again in any way and in all its forms the symbol formerly displayed on its former national flag. Within six months of the entry into force of this Agreement, the Second Party shall proceed to the removal of the symbol displayed on its former national flag from all public sites and public usages on its territory. Archaeological artefacts do not fall within the scope of this provision

¹¹ <https://vlada.mk/sednica/149>

¹² <https://balkaninsight.com/2009/10/27/ghosts-of-the-past-endanger-macedonia-s-future/>

¹³ <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/08/16/unknown-hands-destroy-hellenic-plaques-in-north-macedonia/>

¹⁴ [Десничарски организации од Грција бараат поништување на Договорот од Преспа / Поништување на Договорот од Преспа се бара на протест во Солун](#)

¹⁵ [На Грците тешко им оди спроведувањето на Преспанскиот](#)

¹⁶ [Институциите без одговор на грчко-бугарските негирања и провокации](#)

¹⁷ <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/ma->

[cron-kill-eu-enlargement-dream-191023072639960.html](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-eu-rope-50109054)

^{18.} <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-eu-rope-50109054>

^{19.} <https://www.euronews.com/2019/10/30/zaev-warns-eu-accession-halt-could-cause-a-rise-of-nationalism-in-the-balkans>

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