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Blueprint Prespa? Lessons learned from the Greece-North Macedonia agreement

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- In February 2019, Macedonia received new name boards on its border crossings, and a new logo on the Government website. The country is now officially known as the Republic of North Macedonia. The Prespa Agreement[1] entered into force following the signature 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,. The Greek Parliament was the first of its NATO member states' counterparts to ratify North Macedonia's NATO Accession Protocol.

- The process 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. The Prespa Agreement defies historical determinism in the Balkans. After almost three decades of mistrust, provocations, and international power games between two neighboring countries, the new agreement sends a positive message of compromise, cooperation and strong desire for European integration coming from the Western Balkans. Amidst usual bilateral disputes from the region, such as the Serbia-Kosovo relations or the constant ethno-political fragmentation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Greece demonstrated that core European values can prevail in the traditionally turbulent Balkans.

- Could the Prespa Agreement be used as a blueprint for resolving other bilateral disputes in the region? What are its substantive elements? What are its key constituent components?

1 The official name of the agreement signed by the two sides is: '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'. In this paper we're using the colloquial term 'Prespa Agreement'

Content

Component 1: The 'Elephant in the Room' and Creative Ambiguity

One of the Prespa Agreement's crucial parameters was the attempt to tackle the 'elephant in the room' of the name dispute, i.e. the identity and the heritage. In the context of this commendable but challenging task, creative ambiguity was the central ingredient of the agreement. The Prespa Agreement has demonstrated that landmark deals are not about agreeing on everything, but much more about the willingness to live side by side despite disagreements.

The agreement has tackled the identity dimensions of the conflict, which have been extremely important for the Macedonian side, in a creative but ambiguous manner. The Article 7 of the Agreement attempts to delimit the meanings of the terms "Macedonian" and "Macedonia" enabling both sides to find their own space for use, but also to learn how to develop in the future their respective identities in non-exclusive ways. At the same time, the agreement has tackled head on the issue of heritage and interpretations of historical narratives, which have been extremely important for the Greek side. North Macedonia has given up its claim on the ancient Macedonian history, which is one of the central tenets of Greek national identity, thus fully recommitting itself to its Slavic heritage.

From the perspective of North Macedonia's foreign policy, the Prespa Agreement should also be interpreted within the context of the Friendship Agreement with Bulgaria, signed by the Zaev Government few months before the start of negotiation with Greece, in 2017. The agreement with Bulgaria similarly tackles historical narratives about Slavic Macedonian statehood and national identity. In a broader context, the identity aspects of the implementation of the Prespa Agreement will have to go hand in hand with the Friendship Agreement with Bulgaria. Both agreements have been portrayed to the public as a necessary evil that would enable North Macedonia to adhere to NATO and the EU. At the same time, both agreements inevitably underline the need for rapprochement with neighbors, while settling disputes related to the statehood of North Macedonia that have been pending since the independence.

Component 2: Determined Leadership

Confident and assertive political leadership has been a key prerequisite for settling the name dispute. The strong leadership in both countries was essential for the resolution of the dispute. In North Macedonia, the fact that society was living in the aftermath of the Colorful Revolution facilitated the negotiations and increased the preparedness to accept a compromise. The society of North Macedonia was not enthusiastic about the agreement, but accepted it first because of the sentiment of being in a deadlock due to the frustrating lack of alternatives, and, secondly, hoping that future will be brighter than the post-Yugoslav decades.

In both countries the agreement ratification process included some parliamentary moves that were highly questionable in terms of political legitimacy. However it illustrated the leadership power of the two leaders. Both politicians demonstrated determination to reach their goal, even if at times they had to apply 'arm twisting tactics' or have compromised on principles to achieve a higher goal.

For example, Zaev had to provide the vote of several nationalist opposition MPs, when the Prespa-sanctioned amendments tothe Constitution had to be adopted. The manner in which these votes were secured was a subject of a lot of objections, and critics insisted that Zaev's Government compromised on valuable policy principles pertaining to the rule of law. Overall, Zaev had to pay a high cost to assemble the parliamentary majority for the constitutional amendments in North Macedonia; this became obvious at the Presidential elections, in May 2019, in which "his" candidate ultimately won in the second round, but only after a underwhelming result in the first round.

Similarly, Tsipras did not hesitate to 'sacrifice' his Foreign Minister and Prespa negotiator, Nikos Kotzias, in order to keep Panos Kammenos

and his national-populist party, the Independent Greeks (ANEL), in government for a little longer, in order to secure the success of the process. Once the parliamentary process started he has not eschewed a fall out with his former government partner Kammenos, while at the same time managing to win several of Kammenos's top parliamentarians, despite their ideological differences and loyalty to their party, ANEL. Eventually, Tsipras lost his coalition partner and nearly failed to ratify the Prespa Agreement; however, he managed to overcome the challange successfully, surviving the walkout of his coalition partner and staying in power thanks to a slim majority consisting of individual MPs, who broke rankswith ANEL and other parties.

Thus, both leaders have demonstrated high degree of political wisdom and, no less, questionable tactics in their effort to achieve the ultimate goal of reaching an agreement on the intractable dispute.

Component 3: Transformative Political Strategy

Both Zaev and Tsipras had strategic considerations when negotiating and implementing the Prespa Agreement. They both used the settlement of the name dispute to reshape the political landscape and transform the ideological field. Zaev used the agreement to confront the political legacy of the Gruevski era, to undermine nationalist hegemony in the country and to open the path for NATO and EU membership, which is the most obvious policy goal that unites ethnic Macedonians and Albanians in the country (the "One Society for All" doctrine).

To Tsipras resolving the name dispute became the tool to impose a new political narrative and redraw political cleavages in the country once the period of dire economic crisis had ended. Strategically, he wanted to transform his party into a mainstream party dominating the left spectrum in Greek politics and making inroads into centre-left and centrist vote. For Zaev the project aimed at an immediate political dividend, demonstrating to EU leaders that he was doubling down on his pro-European reform promises by clearing the way for accession talks and thus putting his party in dominant position in the country for the years to come. For Tsipras, on the other hand, there was little immediate political dividend to collect. Instead, his was a political move for the day after – a strategy not for the next elections (to be held in 2019) but for a long-term dominance in the entire political field to the left of New Democracy.

The key difference between the two countries is that the governments were at different phases of their political trajectory. Zaev and SDSM signed the agreement after one year in power following a decade of authoritarianism. Tsipras and SYRIZA were at a point when it was obvious they would very likely lose power after ruling for five years through exhausting austerity and slow economic recovery.

Component 4: International Political Dividends

Both Tsipras and Zaev came to power as politicians promising radical change of the parameters of their respective political systems. Both failed to deliver on their key promises - although some argue that it is too early to judge Zaev's track-record. Neither promised to tackle the name dispute, which turned out to be their key foreign policy achievement making them 'poster children' of the West. This was evident in the praise of Western officials and international media for the two leaders, while being epitomised in their nomination for the Nobel Peace prize.

The two leaders seem to have grown into an international actorness through the Prespa Agreement. Zaev, an unassuming and genuine people's politician who did not have the 'elite credentials' of other members of his government, became a familiar face internationally through the Prespa process and the "only good news" from a region tainted by protracted governance problems and bilateral disputes.

Similarly, Tsipras carefully constructed an image of a serious international counterpart through

the process of reaching the Prespa Agreement. Starting his top political career as a populist firebrand who cultivated anti-Western sentiment at home and agitated political revolt in Europe, he grew into a reliable partner to Western allies and partners. The Prespa Agreement, accomplished despite the odds and against Greek public opinion while in battle with the traditional pro-Western political elite of his country, became his ultimate 'ticket' for this role.

Component 5: Path-Breaking Policy despite Powerful and Popular Opposition

According to polls conducted in previous years in both countries, public opinion stood against a compromise deal. In both cases the governments pursued the path towards a compromise that was opposed by significant segments, or even the majority, of the society. In both countries the government encountered fierce opposition from self-proclaimed 'guardians' of national identity and interest (diaspora, religious actors, far right groups, veterans, football hooligans and others). While the two leaders were not equally popular (see more below), they both still had a significant legitimacy at home in order to pursue a difficult foreign policy change

When it comes to the behavior of the opposition parties, it seems that in both cases the hostility to the Agreement was for tactical and electoral reasons: having the 'dirty job' done by the present governments and then capitalizing on the unpopularity of the Agreement in elections. Tellingly, and based on leaders' political discourse, there is little likelihood that the opposition parties in the two countries, once in power, will seek to annul the agreement.

A key difference in the context was the social and ideological landscape in the two countries. In North Macedonia the reporting of most of the conventional media outlets was quite balanced, and even supportive of an agreement, while in Greece the mainstream media were largely against the agreement. The same goes for public intellectuals. Public support by prominent figures, intellectuals, opinion makers was for many months minimal in Greece; in contrast, in North Macedonia the government attracted much more support in its endeavour to reach an agreement with Greece, partly because the incentives for reaching an agreement were more tangible and obvious in North Macedonia than in Greece. This made it easier for the political class of the former to construct a narrative focusing on benefits for citizens (NATO membership, stabilization, economic benefits related to EU accession etc). In contrast, in Greece the incentives are much more abstract and less resonant with public opinion.

Moreover, the fact that the Zaev government was relatively fresh and still ascending, while the Tsipras government is set to lose the upcoming elections in Greece also contributed to the particular configuration of public support to the agreement. Many influential figures in Greece had enormous difficulty to support a central policy of an unpopular government with which they were at odds and could hardly find a single other policy issue to agree on. Moreover, since there was a widespread belief that SYRIZA government is about to lose power, many opinion makers could hardly benefit from supporting a government that seems to be exiting power; also having in mind their own future career prospects and political profit they were not willing to antagonise the central policy of the opposition party that is about to become government and possibly dominate Greek politics for the coming years.

Component 6: Adequate international support

In both countries Russia exerted its influence in the direction of sabotaging the agreement. However, the Russian 'spoiling' influence was no match for the strong push by the two governments and the support of Western governments and officials.

All diplomatic breakthroughs in the past when it comes to relations between North Macedonia and Greece had happened in the context of increased international interest in the region due to concerns over regional stability and geopolitical

considerations. The lifting of the Greek embargo, the Interim Accord, the rapprochement from the early 2000s – all happened in the context of security crises, either as an initiative to create a buffer zone towards Serbia or as an effort to stabilize North Macedonia. Similarly, Prespa came against the backdrop of increased interest in resolving the Kosovo dispute and final pacification of the Balkans in light of the specter of Russian interference in region. Strong domestic democratic agency coupled with the geopolitical interests of the West were the recipe for the Prespa agreement.

However, the Prespa Agreement has demonstrated that without powerful domestic agency for foreign policy change, not much can be achieved only through international pressure. Strong domestic agency backed up by European/Western support can achieve significant foreign policy objectives even when these are opposed by powerful outside actors, such as Russia. The latter's blocking or 'spoiling' capacity can be neutralised by the right mix of domestic agency and foreign support.

Key Takeaways

There were few but crucial essential elements in the case of the Prespa Agreement that make it unique, but also a potential example to be followed:

- Resolving the central riddle of the dispute, identity and heritage, became crucial for reaching the overall settlement.
- The two leaders demonstrated determination rarely found in the Balkans to resolve the dispute and push their countries to the path of reconciliation with neighbours, sometimes even using tools and tactics of questionable political legitimacy.
- For both sides, the agreement signaled a key component of an overall political strategy aiming to transform the political and ideological landscape and offer to the respective parties and political options, significant long-term benefits.
- The international political dividends for the two leaders have been significant, as both became favourite politicians among Western partners and allies and constructed an international image of forward looking and progressive politicians in a region notorious for the negative influence of political elites and leaders.
- Significant policy change rarely comes easy and the Prespa Agreement did not come without cost. The two sides confronted powerful domestic opposition and a lukewarm, if not hostile, public opinion. Both leaders and governments have borne political cost for their decision for still uncertain future political benefit.
- The right mix of domestic agency and external incentive and support was crucial, as strong domestic agency backed up by European and American support could achieve this landmark foreign policy objective, even if opposed by powerful outside actors, such as Russia.

Lessons learned for the Kosovo-Serbia negotiations

Many analysts have swiftly tried to draw parallels or lessons learned from the Prespa Agreement for a potential Kosovo-Serbia deal. Drawing parallels, however, may be farfetched. The Athens-Skopje talks prior to the agreement maintained the necessary level of privacy, but, at the same time, an unprecedented for the Balkans level of transparency which is missing from the Belgrade-Pristina negotiations.

In the Athens-Skopje case, even though the top leaders and their MFAs maintained a tight grip on the progress of the process, the talks involved the governments with their full foreign policy apparatus. In contrast, the Belgrade-Pristina negotiations seem to involve only the top leaders and their close associates maintaining the image of a potential agreement negotiated only by leaders and without public deliberations.

The fact that the Prespa Agreement was reached by democratically-elected non-nationalist leaders puts into question the assumption that nationalists and autocrats are essential partners for resolving bilateral disputes because they control their societies or because they have the necessary 'patriotic credentials'. In the past, the West often turned a blind eye to Nikola Gruevski's undemocratic practices hoping that he could guarantee stability. Currently, there are fears that very similar practices pursued by Serbia's Aleksandar Vucic are being tolerated because he is believed to have the capacity to deliver a solution on the Kosovo stalemate. The Prespa Agreement has demonstrated that autocrats and nationalists are not the only type of leaders capable of delivering solutions to difficult bilateral disputes.

Finally, the regional impact of the Prespa Agreement will also depend on the political decisions made in the European Union. If the difficult and painful compromise and the courageous orientation towards reconciliation demonstrated by Tsipras and Zaev ultimately result in a starting date for EU accession talks for North Macedonia, the message towards other leaders in the region will be significantly louder. Otherwise, the credibility of EU's conditionality will be further undermined which will inevitably lower the preparedness of other leaders in the region to negotiate solutions to difficult bilateral disputes.

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