

GLOBAL AND REGIONAL ORDERS

# NORTH MACEDONIA'S SOFT DIPLOMACY

Transition of the Prespa Dialogue Forum from a  
Branded Foreign Policy Idea into Reality

**Lejla Ramić Mesihović**  
December 2021.



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From the very beginning, the European Union has strongly supported the historic agreement signed by prime ministers Alexis Tsipras and Zoran Zaev, following negotiations under the auspices of the United Nations.

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In cooperation with:



**VANJSKOPOLITIČKA INICIJATIVA BH**  
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# 1.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since it proclaimed independence in 1992, the Republic of North Macedonia's sovereignty and right to existence has been constantly brought into question by its neighbours. Greece posed the dominant problem, seriously limiting North Macedonia's international interactions and struggle for recognition, because it questioned whether the new state should be entitled to any identity that may be related or connected with ancient Macedonia. After a dispute that lasted three decades and required struggling against coercive diplomatic intrusions by its neighbours, the Republic of Macedonia changed its constitutional name into the Republic of North Macedonia when its Social Democratic Prime Minister Zoran Zaev signed the Prespa Agreement with the Greek Prime Minister at the time Alexis Tsipras. The non-invasive and cooperative foreign policy of North Macedonia's current government reintroduced and reaffirmed pacifist and collaborative foreign policy practices that resulted in the Prespa Forum Initiative.

This is the context within which this paper aims to contribute to understanding the level to which the imperative of good neighbourly relations can be applied by the state formed within the Vardar Macedonia region, a non-European Union country within a rather hostile environment where bilateral issues are converted into multilateral disputes. The analytical method includes interviews, conference materials, media content analysis, and a review of relevant documents.

## 2.

# BACKGROUND

The challenges initiated against North Macedonia by its immediate neighbours are primarily historically conditioned. Although relevant historical background in the case of Macedonia<sup>1</sup> spans events dating back to the context of the 1878 Berlin Congress and the Eastern Crisis, for practical reasons this analysis focuses on the period of the Republic of Macedonia as an independent state, i.e. since it declared independence in 1991.<sup>2</sup>

Following the break-up of Yugoslavia, Macedonia declared its independence on 8 September 1991, invoking the foundations of statehood laid at the session of the Anti-fascist Assembly for the National Liberation of Macedonia (ASNOM) in August 1944. New socio-political, security and economic conditions required a comprehensive reconstruction of Macedonian society and government under exceptionally sensitive and difficult circumstances. Since then, the (Former Yugoslav) Republic of Macedonia<sup>3</sup> has been constantly faced with internal and external challenges. From the very beginning of the so-called Yugoslav crises, there were concerns that the war, which had gradually affected most of the former Yugoslav territory, could be easily transferred to the Republic of Macedonia. For the international community, this fear remained relevant during the wars in Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, reaching particular intensity during the NATO intervention in Kosovo in 1999 and the beginning of the unfolding of the so-called Kosovo crisis, and it intensified again during the armed conflict between Albanian rebels and the Macedonian Armed Forces in 2001. Internal problems on the Macedonian political scene between radicals and moderates, nationalists and non-moderates, and ethnic Macedonians and Albanians, were reflected in the goals, scope and formulation of Macedonian foreign policy. The difficult economic situation, fuelled by Greece's isolationist policy, the embargo against neighbouring Serbia, and the huge influx of refugees on several occasions further

complicated and aggravated situations that required consistency in building international credibility, civil society and a market economy.

Foreign policy challenges were numerous: Greece disputed the name of the country and the identity of a people that had been called nothing but Macedonian for the last few generations, Bulgaria recognised Macedonian statehood but denied the ethnic and linguistic identity of the Macedonian people, Albania supported the Albanian minority in Macedonia, and Serbia's Slobodan Milosevic exerted pressure to keep Macedonia within the structure of the former Yugoslavia. The legacies of all these pressures on independent Macedonia still pose potential threats to the long-term stability of both this country and the region.

The name dispute between the Republic of (North) Macedonia and the Hellenic Republic was finally resolved with the conclusion of the Prespa Agreement,<sup>4</sup> signed on 17 June 2018. This development was witnessed and welcomed by, among others, the European Union, the United Nations, NATO, and the United States of America.

Although lauded internationally as a politically courageous move by the two prime ministers, in both North Macedonia and Greece, the very act of conclusion of the Prespa Agreement gave rise to political and social tensions. Tzpiras survived the parliamentary vote of confidence, but lost the 2019 parliamentary elections, while Zaev barely survived the July 2020 general elections, but his party lost most of its executive government positions at the 2021 local elections.

The pace of reception and domestication of EU-induced norms on resolving bilateral disputes, concealed as a prospect for opening further opportunities in regional cooperation and developing good neighbourly relations, indicates ambivalence in the approach used. The EU's involvement was indirect, but was somehow intrinsically merged in the process, mainly by moderating antagonistic outbursts and nationalist impulses in both domestic and foreign policies.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Def. Macedonia – the entire region that now covers three countries: North Macedonia and parts of Greece and Bulgaria.

<sup>2</sup> Under the UN-sponsored Interim Agreement of September 1995 between Greece and the Republic of Macedonia, in international fora, the Republic of Macedonia is to be called the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYRoM).

<sup>3</sup> The longer version of the name was in accordance with the Interim Agreement between the two countries of 1995. <https://peacemaker.un.org/greecefrom-interimaccord95>

<sup>4</sup> The text of the Prespa Agreement is available on the Greek Foreign Ministry website: <https://www.mfa.gr/images/docs/eidikathemata/agreement.pdf> (last accessed on 3 November 2021)

<sup>5</sup> Hasic, J. Džananovic, N. Ramic-Mesihovic, L: "Implicit" contestations of EU foreign policy norm-domestication in Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia; Global Affairs; volume 6, 2020

## 3.

## OPERATING WITHIN MATRIXES OF INTERNATIONAL TREATIES

Since it declared independence, the Republic of North Macedonia has been trying to overcome actual and potential blockages by its neighbours that questioned the country's basic identity features and related rights. All these disputes were of very high social and political intensity and were partially, and at times entirely blocking the new independent state from performing as an actor on the international scene. Efforts to resolve these disputes have resulted in several bilateral and multilateral agreements: the Interim Agreement that enabled the country to act in international fora during the name dispute with the Hellenic Republic (1995); the Joint Declaration(s) with Bulgaria (1999, 2008, 2017); the Ohrid Agreement (2001) that put an end to the conflict over inter-ethnic tensions between ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians; and the Prespa Agreement that finally resolved the name dispute with Greece (2018). These agreements vary widely in character. The Prespa Agreement, although bilateral, was negotiated and concluded within the framework of a UN Resolution, following an extensive period of UN mediation. In addition to the signatures of the two ministers of foreign affairs, the Prespa Agreement was also signed by the UN SC envoy as a witness. The agreement with Bulgaria is bilateral, while the Ohrid Agreement is an agreement between the four main political parties in the country, signed by them and the president of the country, but also by special representatives of the EU and US who facilitated the negotiation process.

In addition, all these diplomatic resolutions of disputes featured high levels of international engagement, sought both directly, due to fears that the instability might escalate and the conflict spill over into the region, and indirectly as a result of Greece and Bulgaria leveraging their EU and NATO membership to convert these bilateral disputes into multilateral ones, while their political elites flirted with the issues' populist potential. This has significantly disrupted the process of European integration, not only in North Macedonia, but also in the entire Western Balkans region that aspires to join the EU. This contradictory process which has irreversibly distorted the trajectory of EU enlargement, on the one hand, and EU integration on the other, has become particularly open after Greek blockages persisted even after the Thessaloniki Summit of June 2003.

The Summit and its conclusions<sup>6</sup> on openness and commitment to the EU enlargement process were immediately questioned by the host country of the Summit due to the name dispute.

Since 1878, the majority of Bulgarians consider (Vardar) Macedonia to be *Bulgaria irredenta*, and the Macedonian language only a dialect of Bulgarian. A minority is ready to accept that there is a separate Macedonian nation. However, in 1992, contrary to all historically conditioned expectations, official Sofia was the first to recognise the independent Republic of Macedonia. Bulgaria's recognition of Macedonia in 1992 was followed by the opening of the border for goods, fuel transport, export of cheap food, etc.

The Bulgarians said they had finally "buried the hatchet" in 1999,<sup>7</sup> when the beginning of the war in Kosovo was expected. In an agreement signed in February of that year, they acknowledged the existence of an independent Macedonian language, culture and nation. The following extract from the reaffirmation of that agreement, made just after Bulgaria marked its first anniversary of joining the EU, bears this out explicitly:

**The 1999 Joint Declaration was reaffirmed by a joint memorandum signed by Bulgaria and the Republic of Macedonia on January 22, 2008 in Sofia.**

(...)

The two countries shall undertake effective measures for preventing ill-intentioned propaganda by institutions and agencies and shall not allow activities by private individuals aimed at instigating violence, hatred or other such actions which might harm relations between the Republic of Bulgaria and the Republic of Macedonia.

Signed on 22 February 1999 in Sofia, in two originals, each in the official languages of the two countries - in Bulgarian language, according to the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria, and in Macedonian language, according to the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia, both texts being equally authentic.

IVAN KOSTOV  
Prime Minister

LJUBČO GEORGIEVSKI  
Prime Minister

<sup>6</sup> Press release on outcomes of the Summit: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/PRES\\_03\\_163](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/PRES_03_163)

<sup>7</sup> Crampton, J. Richard (2003.) "Balkan posle Drugog svetskog rata"; Beograd, "Clio", p. 403

Also, a meeting of Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov with Zaev in 2017 saw Bulgaria reiterate its commitment to North Macedonia joining NATO and the EU.<sup>8</sup> Since mid-2020, however, Bulgaria in its capacity as an EU Member State has decided to veto further steps on European integration for North Macedonia, conditioning them with North Macedonia consenting to Bulgarian populist discourse and views on North Macedonian ethnic identity, language, origin and history.<sup>9</sup>

## FUNCTIONING UNDER THE INTERIM AGREEMENT

Immediately after the Republic of Macedonia declared independence in 1991, Greek politicians and the dominant part of the academic community launched a hysteria over protecting ancient Macedonian identity that they perceive as exclusively Greek. Prominent Greek theorists, such as George C. Papavizas<sup>10</sup> and Evangelos Kofos<sup>11</sup>, have been developing arguments in favour of a thesis casting the Republic of Macedonia as a source of instability and trouble ever since the country declared its independence. Although Papavizas correctly points out how modern ethnic Macedonians have falsified part of their history, his article “FYRoM: A Source of Balkan Instability” is devoted to an attempt at discrediting Macedonian identity and dismissing the country as an important factor of stability in the region. However, bias and the intention to discredit are visible throughout this article which falsely qualifies Macedonia as “the most ethnically heterogeneous and politically unstable country in the Balkans”. It should also be noted that Papavizas wrote this article while the Eurozone was still grappling with the direct consequences of Greek mismanagement of public finance. The article features the classical conflicting narrative of two sides to every story with two artificially confronted identities. It uses the historical background to contextualise the genesis of the name dispute over the Republic of Macedonia’s constitutional name. In addition to this, Papavizas criticises the ethnic Macedonian majority, claiming that it has failed to reach an adequate solution to the status of Macedonian Albanians and points out their exclusion from the process of resolving the name dispute. The Republic of Macedonia had plenty of difficulties and limitations due to this dispute, particularly during the first three years of its independence, i.e. until the Interim Agreement was signed to regulate the conditions under which the Republic of Macedonia’s presence in bilateral and multilateral fora would be permissible. This Agreement required the Republic of Macedonia to appear in certain contexts under the name

of Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYRoM). The Prespa Agreement has superseded this previous limiting agreement, which was a crisis management intervention rather than a solution.

## OHRID AGREEMENT – INTERNATIONAL MEDIATION EMPLOYED TO RESOLVE AN ARMED CONFLICT

When Yugoslavia started falling apart, Albanians in Macedonia were very reluctant to favour the independence of Macedonia, seeing this process as another division of Albanians among different states. Ivo Banac’s exploration of prospects for multinational states, which turn out to be heavily dependent on both the spirit and system of decision making and on inter-ethnic relations are the most valuable part of the book *The National Question in Yugoslavia*, along with the chapters contextualising the genesis and evolution of Slav nations in the Balkans and their aspirations.<sup>12</sup> Barth’s essay,<sup>13</sup> that points out important theoretical issues in the analysis of ethnic groups, particularly emphasises human insecurities which affect inter-ethnic interaction. According to an anthropological research study directed and edited by Karl Kaser, Albanians did not have equal opportunities to participate in the project of socialist modernisation, and as a result, they were less eager to become part of it. He also adds that Albanians had a pronounced mistrust of all kinds of state intervention.<sup>14</sup>

Macedonia continues to face new challenges following the 2001 armed conflict between ethnic Albanian rebels and state armed forces, which was ended by the Ohrid Framework Agreement that provided ethnic Albanians with many more rights than before. Ethnic Macedonians feel as if their interests have been marginalised in the process. VMRO-DPMNE, a right-wing party, built its 2006 election platform primarily on the ethnic feelings of Macedonians. As noted by Philips<sup>15</sup> and Ragaru,<sup>16</sup> its attitude has at the same time caused problems both within the country, reflected through inter-ethnic tensions, and with Greece over the name dispute. In his research, Neofotistos presents the genesis of relations between ethnic Albanians and ethnic Macedonians, which were at their worst back in 2001. He points out that the instability of these relations and their culmination, which brought about the Ohrid Framework Agreement, should be viewed as a moment in a series of

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/bulgaria-pledges-to-champion-macedonias-eu-and-nato-dreams/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.politico.eu/article/bulgaria-blocks-eu-membership-talks-for-north-macedonia/>

<sup>10</sup> Papavizas, George C., “FYRoM: A Source of Balkan Instability”, *Mediterranean Quarterly* 23:2, Copyright 2012 by Mediterranean Affairs.

<sup>11</sup> Evangelos K. (1999) ‘Greek policy considerations over FYROM’s independence and recognition’, in: James Pettifer (ed.), *The New Macedonian Question*, London, Macmillan Press pp. 226–233.

<sup>12</sup> Banac Ivo; (1984.) “The National Question in Yugoslavia”, New York, the Cornell University Press

<sup>13</sup> Barth, F. (March 1998) “Ethnic Groups and Boundaries” Waveland Press, essay.

<sup>14</sup> Kaser, K. (ed.), “Household and Family in the Balkans – Two Decades of Historical Family Research at University of Graz” Vol 13; LIT Verlag; Wien – Berlin p. 525.

<sup>15</sup> Philips, John. (2004) *Macedonia: War Lords and Rebels in the Balkans*, I. B. Tauris, London/New York.

<sup>16</sup> Batt, J.; Glenny, M.; Kostovicova, D.; Mai, N.; Ragaru, N.; Schmidt Fabian and Vickers, Miranda. (2008) “Is there an Albanian Question?” Chaillot Paper, Institute for Security Studies, Paris.

events that have created instability and unpredictability throughout Macedonian history.<sup>17</sup>

The growing Albanian population in Macedonia is usually seen, particularly by their majority ethnic Macedonian compatriots, as a threat to the current constitutional set-up, power sharing and even regional stability. On the other hand, ethnic Albanians hold that they are being dominated over and that their position and identity are systematically underrepresented. The implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement was a mainstreamed priority. This approach led to Macedonia receiving the European Union candidate country status in 2005. The implementation of the Agreement more often reflected the characteristics of social conditions giving rise to the platform for Albanians to demand their rights, rather than the process of implementation itself.

## STRUGGLE FOR THE PRESPA AGREEMENT

The Prespa Agreement is the unofficial name of the 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. The text was agreed under the auspices of the United Nations on 12 June 2018 in Prespa. However, it was only after it was signed that the real political and diplomatic offensive started for bringing the Agreement to life – in both North Macedonia and Greece, and among the 29 NATO members states. After the October 2018 referendum, North Macedonia amended the Constitution by changing its name from the Republic of Macedonia into the Republic of North Macedonia. In January 2019, the Macedonian Parliament (Sobranie) completed the required procedure to allow for the implementation of the treaty. Two days later, the ruling coalition in Greece fell apart over the agreement, and five days later, Tsipras survived a vote of confidence with a tight majority (151 in favour of Tsipras vs. 148 against). The Greek Parliament completed its procedure to ratify the Agreement on 25 January 2019. Three weeks later, ratification started in all 29 NATO member states and was completed in November 2019. On 27 March 2020, North Macedonia finally became a full NATO member.

From the very beginning, the European Union has strongly supported the historic agreement signed by prime ministers Alexis Tsipras and Zoran Zaev, following negotiations under the auspices of the United Nations.

“It took political courage, leadership and responsibility on all sides to resolve one of the most entrenched disputes in the region. Both countries have seized this unique opportunity which sets an example of reconciliation for Europe as a whole and will give a further boost to the European

perspective of the region,” top European Union officials Junker, Mogherini and Hahn stated at the time.<sup>18</sup>

The Russian Foreign Ministry was not in favour of the agreement, stating that the North Macedonian referendum had a low turnout<sup>19</sup> and discounting the efforts of the two countries to finally have the dispute settled. This statement can be contextualised in light of the fact that prevention of NATO expansion is one of the key foreign policy goals of the Russian Federation.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Neofotistos P. Vasiliki, (2012) “The Risk of War – Everyday Sociality in the Republic of Macedonia”, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia pp. 5-6.

<sup>18</sup> Press release: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/STATEMENT\\_19\\_704](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/STATEMENT_19_704)

<sup>19</sup> ItarTass news: <https://tass.com/world/1039902>

<sup>20</sup> Document on Russian foreign policy goals and key positions: [https://www.rusemb.org.uk/rp\\_insight/](https://www.rusemb.org.uk/rp_insight/)



## 4.

## CONTENT AND POTENTIALS OF THE PRESPA DIALOGUE FORUM

In response to numerous pressures from the neighbourhood, and in the absence of further advancement on the EU integration path, a non-invasive, attentive and cautious foreign policy under the government led by Zaev initiated the Prespa Dialogue Forum as a platform for achieving and maintaining lasting good neighbourly relations. Another aim of this initiative is to reaffirm agreements relevant for North Macedonia's relations with its immediate neighbours.<sup>21</sup>

In order to ensure the continuity of political and diplomatic dialogue, a trilateral initiative that encompasses North Macedonia, Albania and Bulgaria was launched in January 2021 and is known as Initiative 8.<sup>22</sup> Overall, reactions from Brussels and from most of the region were generally very positive.

As per its official description, the Prespa Forum Dialogue (PFD) is a platform created by the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia to enable countries, leaders, organisations, and citizens to build long-term relationships and strengthen partnerships.<sup>23</sup> Focusing primarily on long-term relations and partnerships, the Forum's mission is entirely complementary with the currently most affirmed and prominent regional initiatives supporting the Western Balkans region on its European integration path – the Berlin Process<sup>24</sup> and the Brdo Brijuni Process<sup>25</sup>. Unlike the German-led Berlin Process and Slovenia's and Croatia's initiative on launching the Brdo Brijuni Process, the Prespa Forum is a rare initiative that comes from within the region and aspires to focus on improving good neighbourly relations in a consistent, long-term and inclusive manner. This is an initiative that most certainly stands out because of its authenticity, primarily due to the increasing number of challenges that the proposing country has had to face.

The inaugural session of the Forum took place in Ohrid, North Macedonia, on 1 and 2 July 2021, on the occasion of the third anniversary of the Prespa Agreement. Apart from the protagonists who negotiated and eventually signed the Agreement, the Forum also gathered Western Balkan presidents, prime ministers and foreign ministers, as well as representatives of civil society and the academia. The North Macedonian foreign minister Bujar Osmani stated after the event that the Forum would become a North Macedonian brand, bringing together all EU aspirants from the region.<sup>26</sup> This active commitment to resolving open issues, primarily with neighbours, surely contributes to an understanding and perception of North Macedonia as an active subject in international relations, decisively refusing to be just an object.

Now that the name dispute is over, and with the new challenge of Bulgaria blocking North Macedonia's EU path for its own populist reasons, the absence of an approved Negotiating Framework threatens to disappoint many EU enthusiasts of North Macedonia,<sup>27</sup> a country facing so many blockages that enthusiasm and optimism are increasingly in deficit.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>21</sup> About the Prespa Forum: <https://pfd.mk/about/>

<sup>22</sup> Initiative 8: <https://www.mfa.gov.mk/en/page/13/post/2462/%E2%80%9Cinitiative-8%E2%80%9D-draftplatform-for-trilateral-cooperation-between-north-macedonia-bulgaria-and-albania>

<sup>23</sup> Official web portal of the Forum: <https://pfd.mk>

<sup>24</sup> The Berlin Process resource center (OCD-driven): <https://berlinprocess.info/>

<sup>25</sup> Brdo-Brijuni information page on the Slovene MFA web site: <https://www.predsednik.si/up-rs/uprs-eng.nsf/brdo-brijuni-process>

<sup>26</sup> Statement of Bujar Osmani: <https://www.mfa.gov.mk/en/page/13/post/2648/osmani-prespa-forum-dialogue-is-the-new-brand-of-north-macedonia>

<sup>27</sup> A research study examining EU enthusiasm among the North Macedonian population and ratio of the enthusiasm within the main political parties. One third of people supporting the right-wing VMRO party do not favour EU membership.

<sup>28</sup> NDI research: <https://www.ndi.org/publications/north-macedonia-public-opinion-research-democracy-geopolitics-disinformation>

## 5.

# CONCLUDING REMARKS

Initiated from within the Western Balkans region, the Pre-spa Forum is an excellent example of a candidate country taking the initiative for creating a space for dialogue and cooperation. With this foreign policy move, the government of the Republic of North Macedonia has demonstrated an ability and readiness to respond to insecurities and constant emerging of new challenges and tensions that stand in the way of prosperity in the Western Balkans. At the same time, the country has demonstrated political maturity and a tangible contribution to the imperative of good neighbourly relations.

It is also hoped that this dialogue platform will be a place for generating argumentation in favour of constructive dialogues and finding solutions beneficial for all the parties involved. The Forum also has the potential to provide a growing contribution to developing a steady and widely affirmed discourse that disqualifies any action pandering to populisms and petty politics at the expense of the long-term interests of the entire region. And lastly, this could be the place for the advancement of a political culture which has the potential to lead towards the abolishment of the practice whereby bilateral disputes are converted into multilateral ones by EU and NATO member states and the targeted countries are made to suffer due to the short-sightedness and selfishness of populist agendas.

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## NORTH MACEDONIA'S SOFT DIPLOMACY

### Transition of the Prespa Dialogue Forum from a Branded Foreign Policy Idea into Reality



Since it declared independence, the Republic of North Macedonia has been trying to overcome actual and potential blockages by its neighbours that questioned the country's basic identity features and related rights.



From the very beginning, the European Union has strongly supported the historic agreement signed by prime ministers Alexis Tsipras and Zoran Zaev, following negotiations under the auspices of the United Nations.



Now that the name dispute is over, and with the new challenge of Bulgaria blocking North Macedonia's EU path for its own populist reasons, the absence of an approved Negotiating Framework threatens to disappoint many EU enthusiasts of North Macedonia, a country facing so many blockages that enthusiasm and optimism are increasingly in deficit.

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