



---

## Race with time “name dispute” between Macedonia and Greece

---

**Mirjana Maleska**

South East European University, Tetovo

DOI: 10.2478/v10306-012-0008-3

### Abstract

When shall we see the beginning of the end of the twenty years ‘name dispute’ between Macedonia and Greece, which left Macedonia in front of the NATO and EU doors, and which threatens to disintegrate the state along ethnic lines? When does the moment come when a chance may at least appear that “the nationalism of the powerless” will be considered reasonable when their goals are within reach? If international politics still functions on the principle expounded by the realists – that the strong do what they want while the weak do what they must, and having in mind the name dispute between Macedonia and Greece, the question arises: how much time it takes for the nationalism of those who believe that they are powerful enough to get what they want (saying: “these are our rights and they are nonnegotiable”) to break down the nationalism of the “powerless”?

The main thesis in this article is that whatever was achieved so far as a result of the pressure on Macedonia to change its constitutional name in these twenty years comes down to the following: the Macedonian nationalism increased and strengthened, the antagonism between the Macedonian and the Albanian political parties deepened, and the democratic process in the country was undermined. However, the results of the early elections in 2010, indicate that the Macedonian

society slowly consolidates, under the so called ‘fatigue’ of protracted conflict’ and prepares for a compromise.

**Key words:** Nationalism, national identity, ethnic sensitivity, ‘name issue’, international relations

## Abstrakti

Kur do ta shohim fillimin e mbarimit të konfliktit njëzetvjeçar në mes Maqedonisë dhe Greqisë, i cili la Maqedoninë para dyerve të NATO-s dhe EU-s, dhe i cili konflikt kërcënon, destabilizon shtetin dhe marrëdhëniet ndëretnike? Kur do të vijë momenti në të cilin së paku do të shfaqet një shans që “nacionalizmi i tyre i pafuqishëm” do të konsiderohet si i arsyeshëm, kur qëllimet e tyre do te jenë të arritshme? Nëse politika internacionale ende vazhdon me parimin e shpjeguar nga realistët – që të fuqishmit bëjnë çfarë të duan përderisa të pafuqishmit bëjnë atë që është e domosdoshme. Duke pasur parasysh konfliktin e emrit mes Maqedonisë dhe Greqisë, lind pyetja: sa kohë kërkon nacionalizmi i atyre të cilët besojnë se janë mjaft të fuqishëm ta arrijnë qëllimin e tyre (duke thënë: “ Këto janë të drejtat tona dhe janë të panegociueshme”) për ta neutralizuar nacionalizmin e të “pafuqishmeve”?

Tema kryesore e këtij artikullit është që pa marrë parasysh çka është arritur deri tash, si rezultat i presioneve ndaj Maqedonisë për të ndryshuar emrin e vet kushtetues në këto njëzet vite, vijmë në përfundim se nacionalizmi maqedonas është ngritur dhe forcuar, antagonizmi në mes Maqedonisë dhe politikanëve shqiptarë është thelluar edhe më shumë dhe procesi demokratik në këtë shtet është minuar. Sidoqoftë, rezultatet e zgjedhjeve të hershme në vitin 2010, treguan se populli maqedonas po konsolidohet ngadalë pas të ashtuquajturës “lodhje” nga konflikti i gjatë dhe përgatitet për një kompromis.

## Апстракт

Кога ќе го видиме почетокот на крајот на дваесетгодишниот спор за името меѓу Македонија и Грција, спор што ја остави Македонија пред

вратите на НАТО И ЕУ и кој се заканува да ја дезинтегрира земјата по должина на етничките линии? Кога доаѓа моментот национализмот на слабите(Македонија)е да се покаже разумен кога му се на дофат на раце целите кои ги посакува, како влез во НАТО И ЕУ?

Доколку меѓународната политика сеуште функционира врз принципот кој го воспоставија реалистите, дека силните го прават тоа што сакаат додека слабите, тоа што мораат, а имајќи го на ум спорот со името меѓу Македонија и Грција, тогаш се поставува прашањето: колу време им е потребно на оние што се силни или посилни држави да го постигнат тоа што го сакаат, (велејќи: ова се нашите права и ние за нив не преговараме), односно да го скршат национализмот на послабите држави?

Основната теза на овој текст е дека, притисокот врз Македонија овие дваесетина години, да го смени своето уставно име, може да се сведе на следното: македонскиот национализам зајакна,антагонизмот помеѓу македонските и албанските политички партии се продлабочи а демократскиот проес во земјата е поткопан.Како и да е, резултатот на предвремените избори во 2010 во земјата, укажуваат дека македонското општество полека се консолидира, под влијание на т.нар.продолжен фактот на замор и полека се подготвува за компромис, иако конкретното решение е сеуште далеку.

## **1. Demonstration of power in international politics**

If international politics still functions on the principle expounded by the founder of realistic school (Tukidid, 2000)– that the strong do what they want while the weak do what they must, and having in mind the name dispute between Macedonia and Greece, the question arises: how much time it takes for the nationalism of those who believe that they are powerful enough to get what they want to break down the nationalism of the “powerless”? Their main ‘argument’ is: “These are our rights and they are nonnegotiable”.

To make myself clearer, when shall we see the beginning of the end of this name dispute, which left Macedonia in front of the NATO and EU doors, and which threatens to disintegrate this multiethnic state along ethnic lines? When does the moment come when a chance may at least appear that “the nationalism of the powerless” will be considered reasonable when their goals are within reach?

In about twenty years, I would say. (When an internal armed conflict takes place that jeopardizes the security of the whole region, that timeline is much shorter).(Zartman 1995; Gurr, 1993)

*My thesis is that whatever was achieved so far as a result of the pressure on Macedonia to change its constitutional name in these twenty years comes down to the following: the Macedonian nationalism increased and strengthened, the antagonism between the Macedonian and the Albanian political parties deepened, and the democratic process in the country was undermined. However, the results of the early elections in 2010, indicate that the Macedonian society slowly consolidates under the so called ‘fatigue of protracted name-issue conflict’ and prepares for a compromise.*

## **2. Increasing and strengthening of the politics of nationalism (authoritarian style)**

Here are several indicators in context of this thesis. The early elections in 2008 were provoked by the political crisis that Greece’s strong pressure on Macedonia caused by insisting that country changes its name, erga omnes, as a precondition for its membership in NATO and EU. The Bucharest Summit in 2008, when Greece put a veto on Macedonia’s entrance in NATO, was only the peak of this demonstration of power. The signals that prime minister Gruevski’s

government agrees with the reference ‘Skopje’ in brackets, next to the name of the country, if that is accepted by the citizens on a referendum, wasn’t sincere enough. The veto directly affected the political stability of the country. The opposition accused that the government destroys the European future of the country. The government accused the opposition of treason. The fierce mutual accusations led the whole society in a paranoid atmosphere of searching for culprits, so that the epilogue was organizing early elections. The opposition party, leftist SDSM<sup>+++</sup>, which was more flexible in regard to resolving the dispute with Greece, assumed the position that the referendum means avoiding responsibility on the part of the government and, mainly because of that, it was defeated at these elections.

The citizens of Macedonia responded to the Bucharest veto by giving massive support of the rightist-centrist party VMRO-DPMNE<sup>§§§</sup> and its leader Nikola Gruevski. Although proportional electoral model in Macedonia disperses the political power, Gruevski won 63 of 120 Parliament seats on the early elections in 2008. Together with its coalition partner, Ali Ahmeti’s Albanian party DUI<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup>, he controlled two thirds of the MPs, which is enough to change the constitution of the country. If to this success we add the victory that Gruevski’s coalition achieved at the local elections, then it is understandable that the policy of not yielding to Greece, which VMRO-DPMNE has been a proponent of for twenty years, won full legitimacy. He addressed the voters with a simple, and understandable request: ‘I want a stable government, I want a majority with which no one, at home or abroad, will be able to blackmail me!’

The indisputable rule of Gruevski between 2008 and 2011 brought something good for the country, but it also caused the following political instability, parliamentary crisis, and new early elections in 2010. After the elections, the government concentrated on what the poverty stricken citizens of a country in transition, mostly understand and approve of: fight against corruption, establishing law and order, although sometimes with excessive force and strict sentences. The tax discipline has been increased, which filled the budget with money and enabled the government to spend more for public goods. The unemployment rate of over 30% has not decreased, but it has not increased either as a result of the world economic crisis. Nevertheless, the proposed economic and investment boom has

---

<sup>+++</sup> Social Democratic Alliance of Macedonia (SDSM)

<sup>§§§</sup> Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation-Democratic party of Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE)

<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup> Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) is a political party of ethnic Albanians in Macedonia, led by Ali Ahmeti, former leader of Albanian gerilla, so called Liberation National Army (ONA) from 2001.

not happened because the country is seen abroad as insecure. The average salary remained on a level of 300 EUR a month, the inflation augmented, the external debt rose, while the poor became even poorer. Although it promised to deal only with economy, Gruevski's government spent a lot of time, energy and money to strengthen the Macedonian national identity, choosing the road of a symbolic confrontation with Greece. The younger generation of politicians of VMRO-DPMNE, ostensibly pragmatic but in fact inexperienced nationalists in international politics, played on the card of the Macedonian national sentiments. They did not invent the Macedonian nationalism, nor it is an exclusive property of this party, but they aroused and misused it, as a response to the Greek provocative nationalism. The national passion was already here, as is the case with other young nations: I shall quote Huntington that in similar situations "the politics becomes a means not only for achieving certain interests but also for defining the identity. We know who we are only if we know who we are not and frequently, only if we know who we are against."<sup>††††</sup> (Huntington:1996) The dispute with Greece became more complex to resolve because it expanded.

Macedonia, and perhaps the wider region, is not a favorable milieu for the principle of the majority Westminster democracy: "the winner takes it all". (Lijphart:1977) The political power has affected the winners. VMRO-DPMNE and especially Gruevski, since 2008 until these elections acted as an "anti-party": that is, having a majority in the Parliament, they attempted to humiliate and marginalize the opposition in every way possible. The parliamentary discussion was evaded and replaced allegedly with direct communication with the leader and the people. This is not only lack of sense for the place and role of the opposition in the parliamentary systems, but it is also underestimation of the democratic process in the name of achieving party goals. The opposition was faced with the greatest blow when, in the name of the fight against corruption, an accusation was raised against some of its most significant leaders, and armed and masked police officers and civil servants from the tax bureau stormed into the premises of the popular oppositional television, A1. I do not mean to imply that the opposition has no fault in this. The freedom in our country does not always go hand in hand with responsible behaviors of the opposition or the journalists, for example, but still the final impression is that for the democratic process in Macedonia it is more favorable to have a better balanced and controlled authority.

---

<sup>††††</sup> Samjuel F.Huntington. 1996. *Sudiroi na civilizaciji I preoblikovanjeto na svetskiot poredok*. Evro-Balkan Press. Str. 23

### 3. Misusing ethnic sensitivity

When the cold war ended and Yugoslavia disintegrated, the euphoria for creating a nation-state overtook Macedonia as well. The strengthening of the national cohesion and identity was a way to survive, but in a country in which 25% Albanians and other nationalities live, it was done on their expense. However, the anti-Albanian sentiment is due to the nationalistic ideology of VMRO-DPMNE which at the time was led by its former leader, Ljubco Georgievski. This ideology was defeated with the end of the armed conflict in 2001, and the signing of the Ohrid Agreement. The party revised its program becoming more pragmatic, changed its leader and got back to power at the elections in 2006. The reason for the election success of this party was due to the great dissatisfaction of the ethnic Macedonians from the solutions of the Ohrid Agreement, which were considered unjust and imposed by force. Just as reminder, this agreement gave the Albanian community in Macedonia, which statistically is 25% of the population, rights that are very similar to the cultural autonomy in Belgium and a high degree of constitutionally guaranteed local autonomy. Power-sharing or a certain altered consociational form would also be a good description of the post-conflict resolution for Macedonia. The state is not unitary, and it is not a territorial federation either, but stabilized the country in the last ten years.

The international community would not have been able to help end the conflict and establish peace if it did not encounter the support of all relevant parliamentarian parties in the the country. First of all SDSM, the biggest opposition party in the Parliament in 2001. This party played a crucial role in forming the broad coalition during the war conflict in 2001. The peace could not have happened if the 'international community' hadn't persuade four main political parties in the parliament (two Macedonian and two Albanian parties) to form broad coalition for the impose political solution with the Albanian guerilla and to impose peace in the country. In august 2001 the paece agreement so called Ohrid Framework Agreement was signed and the election in which took part the former guerilla transformed in political party DUI took part. SDSM won the election and formed a government in coalition with DIU. But the decisions it made in its four-year mandate were difficult decisions: forming a government together with the recent enemies, the just disarmed guerilla fighters, changing of the constitutional system as an obligation of the peace agreement, handing over to its Albanian partner, DUI, some municipalities in Western Macedonia, such as Struga, which were traditionally under the authority of the ethnic Macedonians, etc. The award

that followed by the American administration, the recognition of the name of the country, was a great success of the SDSM and DUI coalition government, but obviously insufficient. The party(SDSM) that set off to undertake unpopular solutions in the name of peace and stability of the country lost the elections in 2006.

*This short analysis shows that continually the most successful political position is patriotism and nationalism. Those politicians who make unpopular compromises lose the elections. This rule proves even truer when a nation, such as the Macedonian, is concerned, which, justified or not, feels threatened both by the Greek and the Albanian nationalism.*

#### **4. 'Playnig' on the cart of national feelings**

When at the early elections in 2008 after Bucharest, Gruevski asked the citizens to enable him to get absolute majority so that no one can blackmail him, he did not only have the Greeks in mind or the international factor. First and foremost he meant on the opposition as well as the Albanian partners in the government, who exert pressure, among other demands, for the name dispute with Greece to be resolved sooner. If there is something that unites the Macedonians and Albanians in Macedonia it is the perspective for accession to NATO and EU. If something divides them, that is the conditions under which this integration is to be achieved, i.e. a compromise on the name. While the Macedonian majority rejects the possibility of accessing EU and NATO if the price is change of the name of the country, the Albanians favor urgent membership in NATO and EU hoping that their economic situation will be better. Of course there are some political drims among nationalists that the Albanians will united in a great Albania.

Gaining absolute majority in the Parliament, Gurevski could lead a policy that was not much concerned about the interests and needs of his coalition partner. Millions of resources from the budget were dedicated to the strengthening of the Macedonian ancient and modern identity. It is a controversial phenomenon which, unless he or she is a Macedonian citizen, is interesting for analysis. All the more important facilities were named after Philip or Alexander of Macedonia. A huge monument of Alexander the Great on the city square is raising above the monuments of local heroes as Goce Delcev, Dame Gruev and the atentators from Veles. Metodija

Andonov-Cento is also here, who was imprisoned by Communists as a supporter of the ideas for Greater Macedonian, in order to emphasize the anti-communism of the party in power. The museum of VMRO-DPMNE in classical style is being erected with a very quick pace, where one can find all the so far exiled activists of the rightist option of the old VMRO – Todor Aleksandrov, Vanco Mihajlov and others. In short, the politics directly and conspicuously redefined the previous Macedonian Slavic national identity sending a message that the Macedonians are direct descendants of Philip and Alexander the Great. The Gruevski government outlined the new macedonian defending nationalism: rightist and antidemocratically oriented.

## 5. Closer to the solution?

In June 2011, the Prime Minister Gruevski, with his stable 2/3 majority did not have to respond to the political crisis with early elections. He was led not by reason but by passion: to show everyone that he is right, in reference to the dispute with Greece and to eliminate the political opponent. The expectations were not fulfilled however, and I see in election results a beginning of the consolidation of society and maybe a preparation for compromise with Greece, which will help Macedonia go on. At these early elections, Gruevski lost the absolute majority and won 56 MP seats out of 123, with three new MPs from the Diaspora. SDSM won 15 MP seats more than it previously had. The number of MPs from this party is 42. The winner among the Albanian parties is DUI of Ali Ahmeti, which won 15 mandates, while the other two Albanian parties, DPA of Menduh Tachi and NDP of the economy professor from SEEU, Rufe Osmani, won 10 mandates. According to the already established custom, when composing the coalition government, Gruevski first addressed Ali Ahmeti. Now the relations between the former coalition partners will be different. Ahmeti, as he announced and received more important ministerial positions, equality between the Macedonians and Albanians in the decision-making and more favorable allocation of resources from the budget because, as he said, Albanians are 'autochthonous people and did not shed blood for minor political interest'. And, of course, he promised that the dispute with Greece will soon be resolved. SDSM also learned a lesson from its election defeats and approximated its position to the position of VMRO-DPMNE in regard to the name dispute: that a reasonable solution should be found, which will be acceptable to the people at

referendum. *For the first time in twenty years the political position of those two biggest parliamentary parties, one on power, the other in opposition, come closer. Both parties at this stage stand up for compromise with Greece about the 'name-issue', which will be confirmed on the popular referendum.* Is this means that the country is closer to the solution and thus to the NATO and EU ? From one side, the answer is positive. It seems that the politics of the prime minister Gruevski and its party VMRO-DPMNE, which last twenty years articulated most openly macedonian nationalism, political authoritarianism and not yielding to Greece, is in difficult situation. Society slowly and painfully consolidates around the idea that the compromise with Greece is necessary if the country should keep its fragile stability and improves toward its EU and NATO integration in one piece. On the other side popular referendum introduces uncertainty in this political puzzles. Still far from the solution...

**References :**

1. Gurr R.T.(1993). *Minorities at Risk*. United States Institute of Peace, Washington, D.C
2. Lijphart A.(1977) *Democracy in Plural Societies. A Comparative Exploration*. Yale University Press.
3. Hantington H.S.( 1996) *Sudirota na civilizaciji I preoblikovanjeto na svetskiot poredok*, Evro-Balkan Press.
4. Tukidid (2000) *Melijanskiot dijalog* in Maleski D.(2000) *Megunarodna politika*. Praven Fakultet pri Univerzitetot "Sveti Kiril I Metodij"-Skopje
5. Zartman I.W. editor(1995) *Elusive Peace. Negotiating to end to civil wars*. The Brookings institution, Washington, D.C.