







People in Skopje wave the Macedonian and European Union flags at a rally before a referendum in 2018 on whether to change the country's name to "Republic of North Macedonia." AFP/GETTY IMAGES

# A DIFFICULT PASSAGE

## North Macedonia's turn to the West

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**IN** March 2019, U.S. Army Gen. Curtis Scaparrotti, then NATO supreme allied commander Europe, reported that Russian disinformation campaigns and support to anti-NATO factions had increased over the previous months. Appearing before the U.S. House Armed Services Committee, he expressed concerns "about the Balkans and the increased malign influence over the past year." Heightened Russian involvement and meddling has occurred in North Macedonia as the country of more than 2 million inhabitants has worked to achieve NATO membership, just as Russian activity was seen in other Western Balkan states as they moved toward joining NATO.

North Macedonia is located in a sometimes uneasy neighborhood in Southeastern Europe bordering Serbia, Greece, Bulgaria, Albania and Kosovo. While the citizens represent nine recognized ethnicities, Macedonian and Albanian are predominant, with Albanians residing mostly in the country's western part. Since independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, North Macedonia has had to overcome many difficulties with NATO and European Union member states on its path to membership in those institutions. The major concern was the decadeslong naming dispute with Greece, which the Greek prime minister and the newly elected prime minister of Macedonia settled in 2018 when they signed the Prespa Agreement changing Macedonia's name to North Macedonia.

Previously calling itself the Republic of Macedonia, it was the third nation after Slovenia and Croatia to declare its sovereignty from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1991, and Yugoslav troops were peacefully removed. The United Nations Security Council decided to launch the United Nations Protection Force in December 1992 to monitor and report any developments in the areas along the border and within the newly formed state. In 1995, the mission turned into the United Nations Preventive Deployment Force, which operated until 1999. Both missions are still regarded as having helped ease disintegration tensions and prevent aggressive Serbian engagement in Macedonia. In 1993, Macedonia

became a U.N. member under the name the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) as a result of its disputes with Greece. Athens argued that its northern region is also called Macedonia and that using that name illegitimately claimed the cultural and historical heritage of ancient Macedonia, including Alexander the Great.

In February 1994, tensions rose when the Greek government closed the harbor of Thessaloniki to Macedonian trade. The economic impact was severe because more than 75% of Macedonia's external trade transited the harbor. The embargo was lifted when the EU hinted at initiating judicial measures against Greece due to unfair trade sanctions. After several years and changes of governments, relations between the two countries normalized, although the naming conflict remained unsettled, and Athens continued to make clear that it would use its veto powers to block Skopje's accession to the EU or NATO.

The crisis in Kosovo that began in February 1998 opened another chapter. Armed conflict and the NATO air campaign against Yugoslavia in 1999 caused waves of Kosovo-Albanian refugees to seek protection in Macedonia. The war ended in the summer of 1999, but in early 2001 the more than 500,000 ethnic Albanian citizens of Macedonia began asking for more rights regarding language, education and political representation, and a limited armed conflict ensued. A massive diplomatic intervention by the U.S. ended the hostilities. The Ohrid Framework Agreement was signed in August 2001, stipulating a just distribution of powers and rights between majority and minority citizens. Since that time, there has been a coalition of parties representing the strongest votes of each community. Notwithstanding, and avoiding generalizations, ethnic Albanians are considered to identify more with the U.S., NATO and the EU, whereas ethnic Slavic Macedonians, representing the majority, are divided on the matter.

Skopje applied for membership to the EU in March 2004 and had already attained the official status of an EU candidate country by 2005. Efforts were also made to join NATO, but due to Athens position, the 2008 NATO summit called for the resolution of the naming dispute as a *conditio sine qua non* for joining the Alliance.

During the Nikola Gruevski-led governments of the VMRO-DPMNE (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity) between 2006 and 2016, Macedonia turned inward. A phased Euro-Atlantic integration fatigue among Brussels, Washington and Skopje followed. When Macedonia made international headlines, it was usually about shootouts, road blockades, wiretapping scandals, corruption and reemerging tensions between the major ethnicities. The construction of huge statues of Alexander the Great and his family members in Skopje's city center refueled the disputes between Greece and Macedonia. However, after a politically troubled winter, a Social Democrat-led government was formed in early 2017.

New Prime Minister Zoran Zaev came into office at the end of May 2017 and made it clear that he wanted to settle the naming question with his counterpart, Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras. Following new negotiations, in June

2018 the heads of state signed the Prespa Agreement, named after a lake between Greece and Macedonia. Under the terms of the agreement, Skopje would accept the new name, Republic of North Macedonia, but this stipulation was not accepted by nationalist-minded protagonists from the ethnic majority population. Citizens of Albanian background were mostly neutral since they did not consider themselves stakeholders in a dispute over Hellenic heritage. A referendum was held on the proposed name change in September 2018. Zaev expressed his strong belief in a European Macedonia before the referendum: "We want the future; we want a European Macedonia! It is our responsibility to secure a future for our children and their children."

It was during this time that Moscow began to fear losing its role as a major actor in Macedonia after enjoying 10 years of special attention from the previous, rather nationalistic government. After Macedonian voters opted for a change of government in 2018, the Kremlin acted. Fearing that the dispute settlement between Skopje and Athens would lead to North Macedonia's full integration into trans-Atlantic security structures, the Kremlin tried all angles to create division within Macedonia and encourage ethnic Slavic Macedonian affinity toward Russia, ranging from touting Slavic brotherhood to advocating for the benefits of united Orthodox Christianity. Russia fueled the inner-Macedonian ethnic friction between a strong Albanian minority and a Slavic Macedonian majority.

Moscow's communication strategy was composed of two essential parts: propaganda and disinformation — with propaganda being the selective usage of information or arguments to promote or undermine a political actor or a political aim, and disinformation being politically driven communication designed to generate a certain atmosphere within the public. Both were used by Russia to intervene in North Macedonia's Western-integration process. This communication strategy was generally targeted against NATO and the EU. The main aim was to undermine the credibility of political actors, especially the government, and to disturb the functionality of state institutions. Russia's communication strategy did not necessarily create new facts or falsehoods but rather concentrated on already existing distrust of and resentment against European and Western societies. The Kremlin knew that a nation under distress and suffering weak institutions, oligarchic structures, politicized media and a high level of corruption is particularly vulnerable to these kinds of attacks. As an example of Russia's influence campaign, Russia Today (an international television network funded by the Russian government and directed at audiences outside of Russia) published on its website several reports with anti-NATO and anti-EU views during the period when the naming referendum was being debated.

Russia tried to make use of its power and influence in Greece as well. In July 2018, the Greek government expelled two Russian diplomats and barred two others from entering the country, accusing them of interfering in Greek politics by supporting members of the opposition. Russia opposed the Prespa Agreement by offering bribes and encouraging demonstrations against it. Moscow became less subtle and raised its voice openly when prospects of Euro-Atlantic integration





Workers hang a sign in February 2019 with the country's new name after it was changed to North Macedonia. THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

became far more likely. The Russian government had already warned Macedonia that its membership in NATO would have a negative impact on regional security and bilateral relations. Oleg Scherbak, then Russian ambassador to Macedonia, threatened during a press conference that if war broke out between NATO and Russia, as a NATO member, Macedonia would be a legitimate target.

Russia's strategic communications against the referendum may have worked. A boycott of the referendum urged by Russian-supported nationalists lowered voter participation to 36%, falling far short of the necessary quorum of 50%. While the Western-minded ethnic Albanian population was almost unanimously in favor of the new name, the majority ethnic Macedonian population remained divided. Nevertheless, over 90% of votes cast favored the name change to North Macedonia.

The lack of a quorum moved the issue to the Parliament in Skopje on January 11, 2019, where 81 of 120 representatives, just barely the two-thirds majority required, voted in favor of the change. Local politicians representing all Macedonian communities, Western diplomats and representatives from both of the Brussels-based transnational institutions reacted with relief. The Greek Parliament's approval followed two weeks later. And in February 2019, the Republic of Macedonia was renamed the Republic of North Macedonia. Greece signaled it would no longer block North Macedonia's

ambitions to join NATO. NATO's commitment and willingness have already been demonstrated by allowing North Macedonia to send observers to official sessions.

At the NATO summit in London in December 2019, North Macedonia's chances of becoming the Alliance's 30th member were high until the political turmoil of Spain's parliamentary election resulted in a postponement of the process. Before NATO convened in England to talk about the next steps, the European Council met in Brussels, where the start of membership negotiations was on the agenda. Disappointingly, France blocked the launch of negotiations. But the government policy of North Macedonia remains that there is still no alternative to EU membership.

In sum, North Macedonia's decision in favor of a new name was primarily a decision in favor of Euro-Atlantic integration. And even though Russia interfered, the path toward becoming a Western-oriented country was chosen. Of utmost importance will be inner unification of the country so that there is a strong consensus among all ethnicities and political parties in support of the chosen path. Building North Macedonia into a strong NATO and EU member state should be understood as an opportunity to challenge Russian influence in Europe. Like Russia's failed efforts in Montenegro in 2016, Russian President Vladimir Putin failed to achieve his goals in Skopje. The people of North Macedonia chose a different path for themselves and their children. □