

# A Pacifist Initiative Seeks Recognition: *The Prespa Agreement*

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## ABSTRACT

Contrary to the infamous inability of Balkan states to resolve their differences, North Macedonia and Greece managed to reach an important agreement signifying the end of a decades-long dispute over the name of the former. The Prespa Agreement was primarily reached due to the leadership and the painstaking efforts of the former Prime Ministers Zoran Zaev and Alexis Tsipras. In the present text it will be argued that the agentic power of the Balkan stakeholders was the most decisive factor for the termination of the dispute. In addition, it will be stressed that it is about time that powerful international actors like the US and the EU should fulfil their promises and support North Macedonia in its aspiration to join the latter. This will not only serve their geostrategic interests, it will duly reward a rare expression of Balkan pacifism which is still seeking for recognition. This paper is based on an interview with the former Prime Minister of North Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, a key player in the settlement of the long-lasting disagreement.

**KEYWORDS:** North Macedonia, Greece, Prespa Agreement, EU

## POVZETEK

Severni Makedoniji in Grčiji je v nasprotju z zloglasno nezmožnostjo balkanskih držav, da bi rešile nesoglasja, uspelo doseči pomemben dogovor, ki pomeni konec desetletja trajajočega spora o imenu prve. Prespanski sporazum je bil dosežen predvsem zaradi vodenja in mukotrpnega prizadevanja nekdanjih premierov Zorana Zaeva in Alexisa Ciprasa. V pričujočem besedilu trdimo, da je bila agenturna moč obeh balkanskih promotorjev najbolj odločilen dejavnik za prekinitev spora. Poleg tega je poudarjeno, da je skrajni čas, da močni mednarodni akterji, kot sta ZDA in EU, izpolnijo svoje obljube in podprejo Severno Makedonijo v njenih prizadevanjih, da se pridruži EU. To ne bo služilo le njihovim geostrateškim interesom, temveč bo ustrezno nagradilo redki izraz balkanskega pacifizma, ki še vedno išče priznanje. Prispevek temelji na intervjuju z nekdanjim predsednikom vlade Severne Makedonije Zoranom Zaevom, ključnim akterjem pri reševanju dolgotrajnega spora.

**KLJUČNE BESEDE:** Severna Makedonija, Grčija, Prespanski sporazum, EU

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## INTRODUCTION

Following a prolonged period of political instability, plagued by corruption scandals, inter-ethnic conflicts and violence in parliament (Straveska, 2015), the election of the former Prime Minister Zoran Zaev and his Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM), in 2017, constituted the first change in governance after 11 years of Gruevski's - former leader of the VMRO-DPMNE party - dominance in the political arena of North Macedonia (Chrysogelos and Straveska, 2019). Zaev's left-oriented government had to face Gruevski's political legacy, namely a fragile economy, decaying political institutions and tense inter-ethnic relations (Chrysogelos and Straveska, 2019; Satanakis, 2018). Thus, the consolidation of democracy as well as the interception of the nationalist hegemony were rendered paramount priorities of his government's agenda, in which the "society for all" doctrine - referring to the construction of a multi-ethnic, egalitarian society- occupied a central position (Satanakis, 2018).

Having been imperative to achieve internal cohesion within an ethnically fragmented society, the new reformist coalition government (including the Albanian Party, Democratic Union for Integration) pinned its hopes for integrity, democratization and security on the country's EU and NATO accession. Hence, the former Prime Minister committed himself to removing any hurdles blocking the road to the Euro-Atlantic integration, them being two major bilateral disputes with Greece and Bulgaria; countries that maintain veto power in both institutions (Satanakis, 2018, Vankovska, 2020). It is noteworthy that Zaev's foreign policy signalled a departure from his predecessor's nationalist, confrontational and highly provocative stance to a pacifist course of action, which proved fruitful, since it reached the Prespa Agreement, which is considered to be a "a rare moment of success for Europe" (Smith, 2018). The agreement provided resolution to one of the most intractable disputes in the Balkans - the 'Macedonian issue' - through compromise, exercise of soft power and mutual recognition, heralding an era of peace for the country but also for the whole Balkan region.

The difficulty in resolving the 'Macedonian question' lay mostly in the fact that identity was at the core of this dispute, with mutually antagonistic discourses being engineered by both sides, allowing the conflict to simmer for decades (Loizides, 2020). Starting from the disintegration of Yugoslavia, in 1991, a long sequence of events followed,

characterised by moments of conflict escalation<sup>2</sup> and de-escalation. Most importantly, in 2006, the newly elected VMRO-DPMNE government embarked on an “anti-iquization” policy involving insistence on a direct continuity between contemporary citizens of FYROM and ancient Macedonians (Spaskovska, 2012) provoking Greece’s decision, in 2008, to block FYROM’s entry into NATO (Chryssogelos and Stavreska, 2019). Relations between the two countries were mired in a stalemate till Zoran Zaev took office in 2017 and inaugurated a new period of progressive politics, by signing a Friendship Treaty with Sofia and by implementing confidence-building measures that would alleviate relations with Greece (Satanakis, 2018). The old dispute culminated in its final resolution, when Zaev found in the former Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, a willing partner with an analogous political outlook, freed from the conservative ideological baggage of his predecessors.

The Prespa Agreement took effect in February 2019. FYROM renamed itself North Macedonia, which is a compound name with a geographic qualifier, that neutralises irredentist aspirations towards the Greek province of Macedonia and for its part Greece recognized the right of the Slav majority in North Macedonia to use the term ‘Macedonian’ referring to their language and nationality (Barber, 2019). However, the two sides agreed that the terms ‘Macedonia’ and ‘Macedonian’ refer to different and distinct historical heritages, them being classic Greek antiquity and southern Slavic culture. From this perspective, a name can have more than one referent and this helps both sides to find their own space in terms of identity and heritage (Armakolas and Petkovski, 2019).

The present text, with the incorporated interview that follows, attempts to investigate the impact of Zoran Zaev’s policy on the future of North Macedonia as well as on South-East Europe. In particular, the extended, semi-structured interview below forms part of the methodological foundation of this article, designed to examine - among other things - Zaev’s agency in the resolution of the dispute as well as other unexplored aspects of the negotiation process. Interviewing a leader, whose position has proved critical to the settlement of the issue, will hopefully; enrich our understanding of the significance of agentic power in conflict resolution matters that can sometimes result

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2 Among other important events, in 1994, the confrontational rhetoric grew in severity when Greece imposed a trade embargo on FYROM, which lasted 18 months and caused economic suffocation to the latter (Satanakis, 2018).

in achieving political novelties such as the Prespa Agreement. As for the time frame, it has to be clarified that the discussion took place on the 9th of December 2019, when Zoran Zaev was still the head of government in North Macedonia. The interview touches upon multiple facets of the Prespa Agreement, for instance the actual benefits stemming from it, challenges faced throughout negotiations, the catalytic action taken by both leaderships to resolve the dispute and the role played by the international environment in the signing of the agreement. Special attention is given to the country's expectations towards the EU accession and the path leading to it. In an attempt to further illustrate Zoran Zaev's political profile, the incentives behind his politics are, also, examined.

After the interview section, a discussion follows, which mainly revolves around three points. First, it will be supported that the significance of the agreement principally lies in its defiance of historical determinism in the Balkans by introducing a new vision for peace in the area, aiming to qualitatively alter the relationship between North Macedonia and Greece. Secondly, controverting critical arguments which give prominence to the role played by US and EU actors in the settlement of the dispute with a sole purpose to satisfy their geostrategic interests, it will be argued that agented power of governmental and local stakeholders from both Greece and North Macedonia was the most decisive factor for the termination of the dispute. Most significantly, it will be accentuated that what made the difference in the case of Prespa Agreement is the strong anti-nationalist sentiment shared by key players in both countries, demonstrating that ethical orientation and idealistic positions towards peace can sometimes subvert the status quo in foreign policy decision-making, which is traditionally determined by nationalist agendas. Last, policy recommendations are presented aiming at the further empowerment of the agreement. Conflict resolution theories - characterised by a socio-psychological foundation - as well as other theories that fall under the area of peace studies are being utilised aimed at developing a nuanced comprehension of the symbolic value of the agreement.

## INTERVIEW

**L. Makris:** Since your country gained its independence after seceding from Yugoslavia in 1991, there was an ongoing dispute about its name with your neighbouring country Greece. The Prespa Agreement, which was signed between the two countries in June 2018 and came into

effect in February 2019, ended a long dispute over the use of the term “Macedonia” which was stirring animosity in the region by rousing nationalist emotions in both countries. The basic provisions of the Treaty of Prespa instructed that your country should name itself Republic of North Macedonia, distinguishing it not only culturally but also by denomination from the neighbouring Greek region of Macedonia, and that Greece should as a result support North Macedonia’s efforts to join both the EU and NATO. How do you assess the Prespa Agreement for your country and Greece as well as for the region as a whole? What is the impact of the Prespa Agreement?

**Z. Zaev:** I think it is a historical agreement, not only for the involved parties and the region, but also for Europe and the world as a whole. This is one of the best examples, which demonstrates that it is feasible to achieve resolutions in long-lasting disputes through dialogue and diplomacy. When countries try to resolve differences of this kind between them, involving identity issues, questions of cultural patrimony and alteration of a county’s name, world history shows that final solutions are given only after wars. It is an important agreement resolving a complicated issue which was reached through diplomatic means, and it, thus, sends a powerful message to regions all around the world - because similar disputes are present in different continents - that such peaceful resolutions are possible. We consider it to be the best example of how countries should act in order to overcome frictions and improve their relationships. An example showing that - irrespective of how big the political cost for governments and Prime Ministers is- the most important thing we should take into account is a forward-looking approach in decision-making. Our decisions should be beneficial to next generations. A conciliatory political strategy is an investment for the future and, having that in mind, we all together showed that there are ‘European manners’ here in the Balkans. Even though North Macedonia is an EU candidate country only, while Greece is already a member state, we, in North Macedonia, demonstrated that we believe, too, in European unity and friendship and we are willing to help each other. With our common efforts, the unity that the European Union currently represents will expand and incorporate all of us. Together we will ensure that the next generations will enjoy better living conditions, better than the conditions under which we currently live.

**L. Makris:** Your answer gave me the opportunity to proceed with another question. Would you simply classify your politics as political

realism or is there also an ethical drive behind it? Do you support politics which are simply beneficial for the country, for the economy or are you devoted to a kind of ethical stance, to an ethical opinion about things? What you mentioned about the symbolic value of the agreement to the world as well as the benefits for future generations and people give me the impression that your motives behind decision making go beyond political realism. Is this true?

**Z. Zaev:** I think that many politicians, even before me or Alexis [he refers to the Greek ex-PM Alexis Tsipras], have only good intentions and smart ideas about one's own country but these ideas are not always implemented, probably because a really strong impulse behind them does not exist. There is something that transcends our personal interests and interests of our own countries and this is the future of the whole region and its impact on the whole world. In particular, the idea that by sending a message of cooperation and compromise, we could make politicians more responsible decision-makers and civil organizations more progressive comprised a strong motivation to act the way we did. Of course, there is an ethical dimension behind all these. It requires courage to take this kind of steps, no matter what would happen with my political career or Alexis Tsipras' career at that time; we sent a message that decision-making should be driven by ethical responsibility and vision for the future. This is in the core of the agreement. If this value is followed by more (countries)<sup>3</sup> it will be very helpful. At the same time of course we also achieved other goals. We have friends now; we paved the way for our integration process. All these, for us, mean internal peace, stability, security, more investments, and more cooperation in a variety of ways. Thus, there is a strong ethical dimension in this agreement, thanks to that we are candidates for the Nobel peace prize, thanks to that Alexis and I were given several regional prizes.

**L. Makris:** You mentioned that the incentives behind resolving complex issues - the differences with Bulgaria and Greece - consist of political pragmatism and ethical responsibility. Did any school of thought or any personality that you admire comprise the inspiration behind these political decisions?

**Z. Zaev:** There was an inspiration inside us, personalities that shaped us and contributed to our development as subjects and politicians.

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3 For example Serbia and Kosovo.

Throughout our struggle to find solution to a 27- year old problem, which at the end of the day was a foolish problem, all of us appreciated very much our history and referred to it. We have our heroes but let us adopt a forward looking perspective, because history is important but the importance of history can be more valuable if it contributes to the construction of a better future. So, even if historical debates are present, even if, for example, in one country there are multiple versions of one historical personality, okay leave the debate as it is but let us create conditions - politically speaking - which will enable peaceful co-existence, regardless of antagonistic opinions. Of course, this is a big decision to make but I strongly believe that big changes come with big decisions and I keep saying this lot in my country. On the basis of this principle, in the agreement with Bulgaria we accept that we share a common history with them. Okay, the whole Balkans share a common history and the whole Europe, of course it is not as simple as that, there are a lot of details in it but we accept it as a principle. Additionally, the resolution of the name dispute through the agreement is in the interest of our Greek friends, since it satisfies their wish for a compound name with a geographical determination, which was very important for them. We appreciate Greece, and Macedonia in particular, that is very different from our North Macedonia here, with different traditions, different cultural heritage but in a very friendly way. We recognize each other and we intend to build a friendship, to give space to the people in order next generations not to be stuck in the map like us. We want our citizens to have the opportunity to be more open, more extrovert. We need to stop being held back by frictions and open this region to development! We run a lot of big projects inside the country, we call it “one society for all” as there are multiple communities, besides Macedonians from North Macedonia, we have Albanians, Serbs, Turks, Romas, Vlachs and others. Now, everyone is equal with rights and obligations, which means that people feel more comfortable here in the country than before. Everything we do, we do it for a better economy. We aim to build friendships here in the region, utilizing all our capacities in maximum, with a view to improve economic conditions for our citizens, as security and stability are of primary importance for investments to be made. At the end of the day, we must keep our young people here, avoid letting them emigrate to more developed regions of the world. So, all these are our final goals, what we intend to achieve. Of course, in the future we need to work very hard because the effort for economic prosperity, equal rights and peaceful coexistence within the country can be endless.

**L. Makris:** From what you say, I can discern an altruistic stance towards people. Where does this come from? Is it your political party, your family maybe, or do you personally have these values?

**Z. Zaev:** I think they derive from the family. My political party, of course, also, contributes to the strengthening of this drive, thanks to its leftist values. It doesn't concern me at all whether I will be a politician in the future or not. This is very important. Politicians are mainly devoted to remaining politicians and that is why they sometimes follow false steps in their political careers. There are a lot of possibilities and opportunities -other than pursuing a political career- to contribute to social well-being, to bring happiness to the family, friends, neighbourhood and community. If people embrace this kind of perspective in everyday life, they can make decisions coming out of their hearts. I think much comes from nurture, meaning the values ingrained in someone as a result of her environment.

**L. Makris:** You negotiated with ex Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras about the agreement. Do you think that personalities play an important role even when it comes to Prime Ministers who represent collective interests of their countries? Do you think that personalities can be decisive factors in political outcomes?

**Z. Zaev:** I strongly believe it. Prior to us, there were other Prime Ministers who tried to resolve the issue. I think that our endeavour proved successful because Alexis and I were concomitantly in power. Timing was very favourable for us, not only because both sides were tired after 27 years of futile negotiations but also thanks to the negotiators' personalities who occupied the proper positions at the right time. When I refer to negotiators, of course, I don't only mean Alexis and me but there were, also, Nikos [i.e. ex-Foreign Minister Kotzias] and Nikola [i.e. ex-Foreign Minister Dimitrov], who are very devoted people. There is also one person named Evangelos (..)

**L. Makris:** Kalpadakis.

**Z. Zaev:** Kalpadakis, and Dane Taleski from my cabinet, but also other people who substantially contributed to the process. At the end of the day, leaders with characters shaped negotiations. We experienced, also, dramatic moments during negotiations and how these moments are managed always depends on the personalities of the people involved.



One day, in May, my son finished primary school and we had a kind of celebration with a lot of guests at a restaurant. We had been, also, communicating with Alexis the whole day, messaging and texting and at 19:30 p.m it seemed that we reached a deadlock. My reaction was like “Okay my friend we’ve built a very good friendship, I am very sorry but this is something that we cannot resolve. After fifteen days talking about this issue, it is really not possible to resolve this. I appreciate everything that you’ve done. We have achieved a lot, our friendship will be maintained probably till the end of our lives but I am very sorry to tell you that we cannot reach an agreement”. His response was “Okay Zoran, I am aware of that. We will be in touch.” After three hours, close to the middle of the night, I received a message from Alexis saying “Zoran let us rest during the weekend and then, on Monday, being more cool-headed, let us try again and give a chance to the agreement”. Another example is that during a one-hour negotiation in WhatsApp we prepared ourselves for the meeting in Bulgaria with the European Council, where we were invited to show to the European leaders some results related to the agreement. During a one-hour negotiation with Alexis Tsipras we managed to lighten up a little bit the conversation, helping ourselves to relax. All in all, we tried to create a friendly and humorous ambient in which the agreement could be produced. It was not easy at all and we were finding some ways to relax ourselves. We overcame all these difficult moments because we understood and respected each other. I would be the happiest person if our citizens, from both sides, shared this kind of friendship and I believe that someday it will happen. We are a small region and there are a lot of opportunities for cooperation in the future.(..) So, I disclosed one of the secrets Alexis and I kept but okay it happened in a pleasant way.

**L. Makris:** It must be amazing to realize that during certain moments your actions can have a profound impact on millions of people. I wonder if it is possible for a politician to perceive this fact during negotiations. How did you manage to maintain your composure during the moments the agreement was about to collapse and others during which you were about to conclude it? It’s very difficult to grasp that a man or two men can decide about an issue which can affect entire future generations. It’s fascinating!

**Z. Zaev:** For the first time I met Alexis in Davos on the 24th of January in 2018<sup>4</sup>. When we met, our advisors decided to leave us alone for

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4 The meeting took place in January 2018, within the annual World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.

about two hours. He approached me - I remember I was not wearing a tie - we introduced ourselves to each other and he commented “you are not wearing a tie” and my reaction was “Okay, now is your turn!” (laugh). So, during these two hours he explained to me that he was determined to reach an agreement and I also explained to him that I was equally determined. Then he started to present minimum requirements needed, from his side, to be met, a moment which was very difficult for me. In particular, there were several necessary conditions in order to agree in a new appellation, the most important of them being a geographical determination within a compound name. I highlighted how important it was for us to protect our identity and pride, explaining that there were emotions at stake. We understood each other and we became aware of what kind of decision we needed to make. In the end, we concluded that we were absolutely ready to resolve the issue. I decided to accept his minimum requirements, Alexis, also, said he was ready to accept our minimum requirements and we were finally led to the conclusion that we would probably become politically dead but we didn’t care. We were there to reach a mutually satisfying agreement, durable in time and history as well as beneficial to our citizens. Our wish was to preserve a better future for young people, which goes beyond any political career. So, having this kind of motivation, even in the first meeting, it was made obvious that we shared the same feeling and we were ready to cooperate. Why? Because we didn’t prioritize our political careers. Therefore, I am pretty certain that Alexis and I will never regret for the compromises we made because citizens from both sides know that not only an annoying dispute found a final resolution but also the road opened for a strategic partnership between two countries. The agreement provides a whole framework which enables future cooperation.

**L. Makris:** Yes I agree, but allow me to comment that citizens may not realize this now - eventually they will- because they don’t have the information that you and Alexis Tsipras have regarding the future potential of this agreement.

**Z. Zaev:** Yes. Nobody loses from this agreement, nobody! There is a nationalist and populist rhetoric produced by politicians accusing us of undermining our country with this agreement but eventually nobody loses. We all win.

**L. Makris:** I suppose you agree that the hegemony of a nationalist ardour has been the main challenge for the final resolution of the “Macedonian” issue. What do you think, what’s your opinion about nationalism?

**Z. Zaev:** I am very much afraid of nationalism, maybe because I am from the western Balkans. I am aware of what happened in other parts of the world because of nationalism. When it is radicalized, accompanied by populism, it can definitely become disastrous. There are a lot of poisons in the world but one of the worst is nationalism. Those who exploit it in order to satisfy self-serving political interests, sometimes forget to clean their own hands and they poison everything by spreading animosity in societies. Temporarily, it can bring some benefits to politicians who produce this kind of feelings, such as a rise in popularity, maintenance of power, shift of attention from domestic policies to an external other, but eventually it deeply harms societies. Having that in mind, I know that nationalism is different from patriotism, with the latter being a strong incentive for people to work towards a better future. Of course, as I have already mentioned, all of us are proud of our history but what matters the most is the future. The future is something we need to guarantee and improve. So, I am very careful with nationalism and one of the reasons that I decided to call an election<sup>5</sup> after the disappointment the decision of the European Council generated, was to avoid giving an advantage to nationalism. Nationalism can destroy my country from the inside but it can also harm the relations of North Macedonia with Greece and Bulgaria because the provocations of nationalistic rhetoric can provide the Prime Ministers of Greece and Bulgaria, for example, with enough reasons to take measures against us to protect their dignity and pride. So, nationalism doesn’t contribute to the construction of friendships, it doesn’t foster connections, it doesn’t deliver a prosperous future.

**L. Makris:** Please allow me to add that maybe we should make an effort to be a little bit less proud of our history and build a common history as well, for example the European project is about that, though it hasn’t fully succeeded up to now to build a common history. Sometimes these ideological conceptions are constructed myths, are stories and maybe we can construct new common ones to believe in. I agree perfectly with what you said but sometimes patriotism - some kinds of patriotism - presage nationalism. Do you know what I mean?

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5 Zoran Zaev refers here to the election held in July 2020.

**Z. Zaev:** Yes, different kinds of patriotism (...) one kind of patriotism can immediately bring nationalism and even radicalism. There is another kind of patriotism which I consider it to be, more progressive and more civic. So it's good to be a patriot, but you're a patriot when you don't cause damage to your country and others, instead you attempt to build bridges with others, allowing your country to economically and politically thrive within a secure and stable regional context.

**L. Makris:** What was the role played by the US in the signing of the agreement? Do you think the Americans facilitated what you've done and achieved with Alexis Tsipras?

**Z. Zaev:** They facilitated the agreement just as Boyko Borissov, just as Federica Mogherini, just as Matthew Nimetz did. We, both sides, reached the agreement, understanding each other. I always considered Alexis' needs and commitments because he had to respect Greek society and its institutions. He considered my needs, also, for the same reasons. This is an indication that we honestly wished to reach a mutually satisfying agreement. However, we are humans, sometimes we need motivation, thus Aaron Wess Mitchell encouraged us by saying "You are very close, don't give up! You need to continue, you need some ideas. Give me some information of what is inside so we can play with words!". You know, playing with words is a very good solution sometimes, you can create different combinations and voila the solution! They were very helpful in terms of motivation and encouragement but it was mainly our determination that terminated the dispute.

**L. Makris:** Concerning the role of NATO in the region, how important do you think it is for the region and for your country in particular?

**Z. Zaev:** I think it is very important especially for our region. Probably it is helpful all around the world but our region is a multi-ethnic one, full of conflicts which have been generated throughout history. Eighteen years ago my country experienced a conflict, a lot of people died, young people, not to mention Kosovo and Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Slovenia, every single country. So today the victims' children grew up having lost their parents, it is extremely easy for enmity to arouse. Obviously, there are many sensitive issues open within this region. Thus, more safety, security is needed here. Being a member of NATO does not only mean safety and security for our country but there will be also a big positive impact on the region. Additionally, the-

re are different religious groups, in all these countries, and religious radicalism is still lurking. In addition, the Western Balkans consists of developing countries and there is a lot of poverty. All these factors can easily provoke conflicts. So, for me NATO means internal peace, stability, security, safety, conditions which immediately favour economic development. Why? Because this is the basis for every investment, stability enhances our financial credibility; it makes new jobs available et cetera. So, the membership of North Macedonia in NATO surely means stability for the whole region. For my country this means that one of its biggest strategic goals has already been achieved.

**L. Makris:** What do you anticipate from the EU accession?

**Z. Zaev:** Values, Values! We need to cultivate a “European” culture here; starting from me, as a leader, to the last person in our country. We want to become a member-state of the European Union not only because we would like to be part of that family, but because we need to get ‘Europeanized’. Why? Because we believe in democracy, rule of law, egalitarianism, transparency and we want to fight corruption. Personally, I know that I will safeguard the unity of my country - territorial unity - with the hope that one day we will be part of the European Union. This is my hope.

**L. Makris:** Is there resistance to such an evolution?

**Z. Zaev:** Yes. We have been successful but we need to work more. We need to work on the judicial system, the fight against corruption, freedom of speech, freedom of media. All these comprise the quality of life we hope to achieve. The ‘Europeanization’ of North Macedonia means better life quality for our citizens. We expect from the European Union to stimulate our motivation to help us complete our political reform. There should be a goal to be achieved; there should be a motivation to achieve this goal. For the time being, for us, the European Union has turned off those shining stars on its flag, now it’s all dark. Those shining stars should be turned on again, because there is no other light for us. Membership in the European Union is of high importance, for the ‘Europeanization’ of our country, for the values that we expect. When we are ready for that, following the necessary reforms, then hopefully, we will be full members of the European Union. Following the transitional period, we will be a member state, which will entail many advantages i.e. favourable loan terms and many other

benefits as well as obligations. Non-European countries cannot help us to strengthen our rule of law, egalitarianism, democracy or freedoms. Instead, we believe that the European Union can give us this kind of values in order to improve the quality of our life.

**L. Makris:** What can your country offer to the EU as a prospective member state?

**Z. Zaev:** First of all, I consider the Prespa Agreement to be a real success since it gave us the opportunity to demonstrate our capability of resolving foreign policy issues peacefully, with the exercise of soft power. We manifested our strong commitment to the values of democracy, dialogue and compromise. Therefore, I think that we can only add value to the European Union. Specifically, there is a condition according to which the accession of a country cannot be accomplished as long as there are bilateral problems with member states. Evidently, the Union wishes to avoid importing bilateral problems. Thus, by normalizing our relations with Greece, we managed to remove a significant obstacle blocking the way to our integration. The incorporation of European values in North Macedonia can only contribute to the democratic unification of the continent, adding value to the European Union. Economically speaking, also, European companies are already established here. They are quite profitable, benefiting from our economic rules, while bringing expertise to us. This cooperation can deepen and widen thanks to the future EU accession of North Macedonia.

**L. Makris:** What is your opinion about the penetration of Russia and Turkey in the region of the Western Balkans and your country in particular? What is your *modus operandi* in the interaction with them?

**Z. Zaev:** They are present all around the region; they are, also, present in my country. They are very much against NATO enlargement. They definitely maintain their own political, economic and energy interests but there is nothing new in that. The crucial question is where we decide to go, with whom to increase cooperation with. We are a small country and it is good for us to cooperate with everybody. However, Russia, China and the Middle East need to know that we have made our decision, deriving from our sovereign right, to be part of NATO and the European Union. Why? Because this will give us a better life. They will accept that completely - hopefully - and this will

give us the opportunity to cooperate with everybody but of course without jeopardizing our participation in NATO and the European Union.

**L. Makris:** Thank you very much. It was a pleasure to discuss with you.

## DISCUSSION

Prespa Agreement comprises a diplomatic breakthrough and an exemplary case, as Zoran Zaev frequently describes it across the discussion, for it resisted historical determinism. Specifically, the region of the Balkans is most often identified with its inaptitude to redetermine itself with conscious human action either individual or collective in order to change the course of its history. The region is often perceived as predestined to repeat the same mistakes, namely the incapacity of harmonious coexistence between different ethnic and religious groups and inclination towards nationalism (Paschalidis, 2013). On the contrary, it has been proven that agented power in history can instigate unpredictable and positive developments such as an agreement which constitutes an example of what John W. Burton - a pioneer in the area of peace studies - describes as *conflict resolution* (1969).

Burton highlights that what renders an agreement successful and durable in time is its ability to accommodate both parties' basic human needs; these can be identity, recognition and security (1969). Moreover, conflict resolution refers to an agreement which is reached interactively, not imposed by external powers, it entails trust-building and most significantly, it establishes a new relationship between the involved parties, a partnership in which both sides collaborate and address each other's needs, being convinced that the sustenance of peace is beneficial for all. As opposed to conflict resolution, *conflict settlement* refers to a process that generates an agreement which rests on a power dynamic that determines the bargaining ability of each party and does not necessarily aim to influence the quality of the relationship between the parties (Kelman, 2008).

Even though in the empirical world no agreement can be a pure example of one or the other type of accord, the presence of confidence-building atmosphere in the case of Prespa agreement, the compromises, the development of a friendship between the two former Prime

Ministers<sup>6</sup> and of course the provision of an institutional framework which enables the construction of a future partnership and multi-level connectivity (Armakolas et al, 2020) bring the agreement closer to the ideal of conflict resolution. Most importantly, though, the resolution addresses the basic need for identity recognition, by accepting the multiple heritages related to the geographic region of Macedonia and allowing each side to be identified with ‘Macedonia’ in a non-exclusive way. This, of course, required deep compromises and courage to confront the nationalist hardliners positions in both countries, them being the Greeks’ strong disapproval of the neighbouring country using the term ‘Macedonia’ even within a compound appellation (Armakolas and Siakas, 2021; Chrysosgelos, Stavreska, 2019) and North Macedonians’ insistence on an uninterrupted link to ancient Macedonia (Chrysosgelos, Stavreska, 2019).

Despite the unparalleled determination manifested by both former Prime Ministers to lead the dispute to its definite resolution, there is a quite refutable argument according to which the Prespa Agreement is nothing more than a ‘liberal narrative’ over a success story of reaching a peaceful solution in a persistent dispute, while in reality the Realpolitik foundation of the matter, namely the desire of EU and NATO elites to minimize the influence of Russia in the region has been concealed (Vankovska, 2020, p.344). This view reduces the governments of the two countries to marionettes enmeshed in a power game with little or no agency at all and also, limits the essence of politics to the mere pursuing of material interests and to actors’ struggle for survival within harsh international antagonisms, while idealistic and emotional incentives, which could be the reason for profound political change, are excluded from politics. Even though, no one can underestimate the determining factor of power dynamics in international relations, a more multi-dimensional and intricate approach would be appropriate in order to unravel the decisive elements behind the settlement of the dispute.

The “Macedonian” question has been simmering for decades in spite of the US high officials’ intense efforts to terminate the issue. The intractability of the matter and its final solution led Matthew Nimetz - the foreign official mostly associated with the 27-year long negotiati-

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6 A testament of this is what ZaeV states in the above interview (see p.10): “I always considered Alexis’ needs and commitments because he had to respect institutions and society in Greece. He considered my needs, also, for the same reasons”.



ons, serving as the US presidential envoy and later as the UN mediator for 2 decades - to query in his article “Why did it take us so long?” (2020, p.205). Undoubtedly, officials from the USA and the EU strongly encouraged resolution during the nearly 3-decade long diplomatic struggle for settlement of the dispute (Nimetz, 2020). However, their efforts did not come to fruition till 2018 and this can be attributed to the unwillingness of the countries’ ruling powers to take such a huge responsibility which would entail political cost, enflaming the uncompromising popular sentiment and public disapproval (Armakolas and Siakas, 2021). Besides, governments’ conservative orientation as well as the exploitation of nationalist rhetoric for maintenance of power and displacement of public attention from real domestic problems to external threats (Vankovska, 2020) played a significant role in the perpetuation of the dispute.

In the discussion presented, it becomes obvious that leadership determination of both sides was a precondition of massive importance in the resolution of the issue. In moments when negotiations seemed to be in a deadlock, it was the leaders’ dedication, willingness and communication charisma that normalized negotiations. Apart from the favourable circumstance of two ideologically analogous governments, with similar agendas, being concurrently in power, the two leaders demonstrated incomparable determination to lead the countries in the path of resolution, especially the former Prime Minister of North Macedonia, on the grounds that he had to initiate radical modifications, them being constitutional changes and alteration of the country’s name *erga omnes* (Chryssogelos and Stavreska, 2019) in a period of peace, which is unprecedented in European history. Not to mention the ratification processes in parliaments, this comprised an odyssey on its own, since the two leaders had to deploy various manoeuvring tactics, indicative of their political intelligence and determination to find a solution (Armakolas and Petkovski, 2019). Besides, as it becomes evident across the discussion, Zaev can be described as a political subject with an intense ethical stance over politics, which inevitably has contributed to his decision to embark on a pacifist course of action. Thus, the agentic power of both governments cannot be easily depreciated, for leaders’ qualities shaped negotiations. On the other hand, it would be simplistic to ascribe the resolution of the issue exclusively to the voluntarism of both leaderships. Instead, it seems more appropriate to argue that a combination of external encouragement and domestic agency was the recipe for the success of Prespa Agreement (Armakolas and Petkovski, 2019).

Apart from governmental action, the contribution of local agents in the normalization of relations between the two countries has been valuable. In particular, I am referring to the former mayor of Thessaloniki Yiannis Boutaris, who is best known for his embarking on progressive city diplomacy of extroversion, utilizing the multi-cultural heritage of Thessaloniki (Makris, 2019). Freed from nationalist complexes and misconceptions, mayor Boutaris ventured to pacify relations with neighbourly countries, such as North Macedonia, that were traditionally conceived as enemies of Greece. As a mayor of a city that is considered to be the capital of Greek Macedonia, Boutaris' assistance in the rapprochement between North Macedonia and Greece has been recognized as determinant (Deutsche Welle, 2017), on the grounds that he contributed to the creation of an amicable atmosphere with high officials like the former Prime Minister Zaev and former Foreign Minister Dimitrov (Makris, 2019). Particularly, towards the end of 2017, at a moment when the new circle of negotiations had hardly started, Mayor Boutaris invited Zoran Zaev to dinner at a restaurant in Thessaloniki which, even though unofficial, constituted the very first step towards rapprochement between the two parties (Deutsche Welle, 2017).

Besides, Yiannis Boutaris manifested actively his support for Prespa Agreement (Hope, 2018) in a period when public opinion was intensely negative towards any resolution, with rallies taking place in Greece, especially in Thessaloniki. As a result, except for the Greek government led by Tsipras, Yiannis Boutaris became, also, a recipient of public discontent (Makris, 2019). Possibly, the Prespa Agreement could have never come to fruition without the unflinching political will of the aforementioned governmental and local agents. Favoured by the convenient occasion of all those actors - from both sides - being concomitantly in power, they took concerted action and managed to overturn the course of history, by thwarting the hegemony of nationalist strategies in foreign policy decision-making. The decisive element in that remarkable occasion was the fact that all those agents were legitimate political actors who shared a common anti nationalist sentiment. Thus, being driven by values of peace, compromise and recognition, they managed to release their politics from the shackles of national myths and navigate new modes of international coexistence, which comprises a kind of pacifism. Most significantly, those political figures demonstrated that sometimes ethical and idealistic positions towards peace and cooperation can make the difference, defying historical determinism.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

In order to make the Prespa agreement durable in time, the transformation of relations between the two countries should not be limited to the macro-level of leadership, instead initiatives aiming at trust-building have to be planned for the entire societies so that consensus regarding the agreement can be progressively developed. The objective of those initiatives can be the facilitation of inter-group communication and the experience of the everyday benefits that stem from the agreement, something that requires further political action.

In identity conflicts there are usually deeply instilled socio-psychological representations, shaping our image of the other, preventing us from truly familiarising with the unfamiliar (Moscovici, 2001). In order for those psychological obstacles to be removed, people should be in contact so as to start feeling and thinking differently of each other, discovering commonalities, in an attempt to approach the opponent. In other words, the existing *ethos of conflict* should be disempowered. Ethos of conflict consists of rigid societal beliefs which are configured historically within contexts of persistent conflicts, being resistant to any attempt to explore peaceful solutions (Bar-Tal, 2000). Perceptions of positive collective self-image and demonization of the other, self-victimisation and delegitimization of the enemy as well as monolithic, though coherent, rationales concerning a group's justness to pursue its goals are usually dominant in ethos of conflict (Bar - Tal, 1998, 2007). Aiming to weaken the rigidity of those societal beliefs, socio-psychological mechanisms, designed to challenge the dominant image of the enemy are required.

Kelman - a social psychologist deeply influenced by Burton's work - introduced *interactive problem-solving* as a methodology formed to breed changes in public opinion through interpersonal interaction among people coming from conflicting ethnic or religious groups, organised within small settings (1996). In particular, this micro-process aims at the facilitation of inter-group communication, giving individuals the opportunity to discover each group's needs and fears, in an attempt to humanise the other. The main goal of the process is to enable each participant to take the other's perspective and gain an understanding of the other's human needs and agonies, making participants, in this way, more amenable to compromises and attitude modifications. Thus, it is considered to be a deeply empathic process,

dialectical in nature, with dialogue functioning as the key methodological instrument.

The biggest success of the process is to help both sides realise that whatever people do, they do it to satisfy basic needs and that fulfilment of one party's needs does not necessarily pose a threat to the other's existence (Kelman, 1996). Providing that this kind of micro-level atypical diplomacy is incorporated into programmes initiated by government or civil society organisations in terms of multi-level connectivity between North Macedonia and Greece, it could be highly conducive to the deconstruction of stereotypes and the construction of new more humane images of the other, based on the understanding that agony for recognition lies in the heart of this dispute. Also, throughout this exploratory interaction Greeks and citizens of North Macedonia could discover cultural commonalities - for instance culinary traditions and folk music - deriving from the common Ottoman past. In that way groups could start to reconfigure their collective identities in ways which would be more constructive and less mutually exclusive. Arguably, national identities should not be conceived as natural, static and archaic entities, untouchable by historical rearrangements but instead, as Kedourie cogently highlights, they are quite malleable, products of historical volatility and self determination (1993).

Citizens of both countries need to experience the benefits of the agreement, also, within their everyday lives in order to positively evaluate it. This requires the acceleration of implementation of the memoranda such as the ones concerning the facilitation of transport connectivity and the reduction of roaming charges (Armakolas et al, 2020) Also, the agreements on trademarks and on the content of school books concerning the history of the region which are now characterised by stasis (Armakolas, Petkovski, Voudouri, 2020), should develop and fructify. Furthermore, it is advisable that the Greek government should not further protract the ratification of the three bilateral agreements which make provisions for economic and military synergy between the two countries as well as (make provisions for) Greece's support towards North Macedonia's EU integration, objectives which are vital for the agreement as a whole (Trkanjec, 2021). Last, in Greece, the erection of new road signs including the name of North Macedonia should be expedited, in order for the agreement to be part of citizens' everyday experience and thus, be gradually solidified.

## CONCLUSION

The importance of the Prespa Agreement cannot be reduced to the mere settlement of a name dispute. Apart from the undeniable symbolic value emanating from the agreement, the benefits are multiple for both parts and South-East Europe in general. Concerning North Macedonia, the settlement unlocked the country's entry into NATO, enhanced citizens' feeling of belonging in an international community and paved the way for the commencement of negotiations aiming at the EU accession, which was ultimately achieved. Even though there are still obstacles to be removed<sup>7</sup>, the strong desire for EU integration provides the country with impetus for profound economic and political reform, a unique impulse towards implementing the rule of law in practice and an important drive to achieve future prosperity. Furthermore, the protection of the country's integrity - secured by the agreement which enabled NATO membership - has a broader strategic importance that lies in safeguarding stability and security in the region, which otherwise could be threatened by irredentist aspirations of neighbouring countries towards North Macedonia, for instance the secessionism of the Albanian minority could be a menace. A possible dissolution of the small country would radically change the landscape in Western Balkans, leading to new territorial expansions, new conflicts and rise of nationalist ardour. Greece, on the other side, will not consume any more diplomatic capital on an intractable issue, while facing more serious challenges with Turkey. Instead, the agreement opens the way for a new friendship to thrive, enabling political, economic and societal cooperation between the two countries.

Moreover, with regards to the implications of the agreement on the region as a whole, Zoran Zaev's determination to lead his country towards EU accession by overcoming all possible shortcomings can potentially boost the effort to complete the democratic unification of the continent by incorporating the Western Balkans. The recent opening of accession talks with North Macedonia and of course its final integration will do more than merely assisting the country's internal stabilization and prosperity. It will encourage moderate politics to spread in a traditionally turbulent region and it will additionally

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<sup>7</sup> According to the deal aimed at settling the dispute with Bulgaria and allowing the commencement of EU accession, North Macedonia's constitution is expected to be amended to recognise the Bulgarian minority, which does not come without political complications and objections from the side of North Macedonia.

strengthen the European Union's overall capacity to influence the region vis-à-vis the role of non-European countries which aspire to claim geopolitical and economic gains of their own in this tormented part of the world.

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