

Why Greece Can't Be Trusted in the Name Negotiations

By Victor Bivell

The United Nations has long brokered 'name negotiations' between the Governments of Macedonia and Greece, but even if a compromise solution is agreed between the two Governments, there is strong evidence to show that the Greek Government has a history of being a dishonorable party in international agreements and cannot be trusted to fulfil any obligations it takes on. This brief paper explores some of that evidence in relation to Macedonian issues, and in particular the dramatic events that occurred in Australia in 1994 when the Australian Government officially recognized Macedonia as the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

The official remit of the UN-mediated negotiations is only about the name of Macedonia, but it is well known that Greece would like any new name to also include the Macedonian identity, the Macedonian language and other adjectival descriptors. These descriptors of Macedonian identity have been under attack by the Greek Government and Greek activists for over a century. For example, Macedonians are well aware that there is a large volunteer network of Greek activists around the world who are constantly lobbying and in other ways trying to undermine the public acceptance of the Macedonian identity and culture.

Macedonian-Australians have witnessed and suffered this intense activism over a long period. A dramatic example was in early 1994 when the Australian Government gave diplomatic recognition to the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Immediately following the recognition, there was over a period of several weeks of violence and arson against Macedonian properties - two churches were extensively burnt and there was damage to Macedonian owned businesses and properties. To this day the police have not told the Macedonian community if any charges were laid and if so against whom.

In the belief that it would end the violence, the Federal Government announced a directive to rename the Macedonians from the Republic of Macedonia as "Slav-Macedonians", and to rename Macedonians from Aegean Macedonia/ northern Greece as "individuals associated with Slav-Macedonians". The Macedonian community was not consulted about this change and learned about it from the media.

The governments of Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia, where the immigrant Greek community is larger than the Macedonian community and where the parliaments had members of Greek origin, supported this directive in the belief it would win them votes. A little later the Victorian Government also renamed the Macedonian language as "Macedonian (Slavonic)".

The Macedonian community was immediately and totally opposed to the name changes. This meant it was suddenly in the position of simultaneously fighting the Australian Government, the Victorian Government, the NSW Government, and the South Australia Government.

Only the Western Australia Government spoke in support of the Macedonians. Unlike the other States, Western Australia had more Macedonians than Greeks and had seen no acts of violence. Macedonians also had the support of the Australian public, who could see the racism and injustice in the renamings; and also the support of the Australian media, who refused to follow the directive and continued to refer to Macedonians as Macedonians.

With the announced renaming of the Macedonian identity, the Macedonian community in Australia immediately began a program of sustained civil disobedience to the directive, which after many years led to the Government abandoning the directive and once again referring to Macedonians as Macedonians.

With the renaming of the Macedonian language, legal action was taken in the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission on the basis that the change was discriminatory and racist. The matter also went to the Federal Court, the Full Federal Court and the High Court of Australia before the case was successfully resolved in the favour of the Macedonians and the language in Victoria was again officially Macedonian. The matter was resolved because the Victorian Government ran out of courts in which to challenge the legal judgement that changing the name of the language was discriminatory and racist.

While the Macedonians in Australia were ultimately successful in their self defense, they remain deeply traumatized by the assault on their identity and language, and remain deeply cynical of the Greek Government. They are unwilling to believe the assurances of the United Nations and other parties that any new name for the Republic will not be seen by Greece as an opportunity to again assault the Macedonian identity.

The events in Australia, together with other examples, open a number of questions about the ultimate success of any agreement between Macedonia and Greece.

Even if the Greek Government were to agree that any agreement with the Macedonian Government would not affect the Macedonian identity, do the United Nations brokered talks include a mechanism to restrain the Greek Government from working to use any new name to change the Macedonian identity and the name of the Macedonian language?

The events in Australia illustrate the ability of the Greek community to mobilize significant lobbying power and political influence against the Macedonian community. As well as in Australia, it also has such ability in the USA, Canada and some European countries. Do the UN

brokered talks include a mechanism to restrain Greek diaspora communities from working to use any new name for Macedonia to change the Macedonian identity and the name of the Macedonian language in their respective countries?

Even if Greece signs an agreement with Macedonia, Greece has a poor record of upholding both the letter and the spirit of international agreements. One such example is that at its inception the reference “Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” was for internal United Nations use only, yet Greece worked to spread the use of this reference more widely including in the European Union and other countries and international organizations.

Another example is the Interim Accord between Greece and Macedonia where Greece said that it would support Macedonia’s entry into NATO under the name Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia - but in 2008 it failed to do so and continues to not do so.

Nor would a United Nations guarantee to any agreement be of any value. An example is when the UN’s International Court of Justice confirmed that Greece had violated the Interim Accord by not allowing Macedonia to join NATO under the name Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Greece ignored the judgement and suffered no penalty, while Macedonia is still not a member of NATO.

My 2012 article ‘Greek Crisis Shows Weak International Ethics’ has many other examples of where the Greek Government has violated the letter and spirit of international agreements and treaties. See http://www.pollitecon.com/html/essays/Greek_Crisis_Shows_Weak_International_Ethics.htm

Another question is do the United Nations brokered talks include a mechanism for Greece not to rename Greek Macedonia and its three administrative regions as simply ‘Macedonia’, and thus usurp the name Macedonia? If Greece does this, what mechanisms are available to stop it? Are any assurances it may give that it will not so of any value?

Do the United Nations brokered talks include a mechanism to stop Greece monopolizing the adjective ‘Macedonian’? Already it has started to refer to the residents of Greek Macedonia as “Macedonians”, even though the great majority are “New Macedonians” who came from Turkey less than a hundred years ago. The Greek Government shows no inclination to stop this process of taking the Macedonian identity from the ethnic Macedonians and giving it to the new, Greek residents of Greek Macedonia.

The above short list is part of a very much longer list of dishonorable behavior by the Greek Government. And that behavior is only one of a number of reasons why so many Macedonians around the world want the United Nations brokered name negotiations to cease immediately.

The United Nations may believe that by brokering these talks it is assisting international relations. This is not so. In reality the United Nations is allowing itself to be used to further a century-long campaign of cultural genocide against the Macedonian people.

A solution to the 'name issue' is to have a country called Greece and a country called Macedonia; a people called Greeks and a people called Macedonians. No promises or agreements are needed for this to work. The only requirement is common sense. Or, if that is too hard, for Greece to fulfil its international treaty obligations, follow United Nations covenants, protocols and reports, and recognize its ethnic and linguistic minorities including its Macedonian minority.

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