

Greece's far-right and military lead protests over Republic of Macedonia name

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Large rallies organised by right-wing and fascist forces have taken place in Greece protesting the use of the name “Macedonia” by the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, on Greece’s northern border.

A rally held February 4 in Athens, estimated by the police at 140,000, easily overfilled the main Syntagma Square, with up to 500,000 attending according to other reports.

The rally was officially endorsed by the Greek Orthodox Church, with senior clergy invited to speak. A large contingent of the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn was present. It was preceded by a similar event two weeks earlier in the northern Greek city of Thessaloniki, Greece’s second largest city and the capital of its Macedonian region.

Along with sections of the military, one of the leading organisers of both rallies was the Pan Macedonia Association (PMA), a US-based organisation with chapters among the Greek diaspora around the world. The PMA is an extreme right-wing organisation, which was on friendly terms with the 1967-74 military junta. It was founded in 1947, the year Truman declared his doctrine committing the US to a global engagement against communism and the USSR.

The PMA website states, “The Truman Administration through the aforementioned Doctrine Plan and the financial support of America along with the so many sacrifices by the Greek people and the Greek blood spilled during the Civil War, saved Macedonia from the tentacles of the Communist threat.”

The Macedonia name dispute has been ongoing for over a quarter century since the break-up of Yugoslavia in 1991, with Greek governments claiming that use of the name by its northern neighbour conceals irredentist ambitions over the northern Greek province of Macedonia.

In 1993, Macedonia joined the United Nations under the provisional name “Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” (FYROM). Since then repeated attempts to resolve the dispute have stalled, with Greece vetoing Macedonia’s accession to NATO and the European Union in 2008 and 2009 respectively.

Hopes for a settlement were rekindled following a two-hour meeting between Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras and his Macedonian counterpart Zoran Zaef, held on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum in Davos January 24. At a press conference, Zaef declared that the names of “Alexander the Great” airport and highway, named after the Ancient Macedonian king, would be changed to “Friendship.” Stating “our activities show our goodwill,” he added, “This testifies that we have no territorial claims.”

Tsipras stated, “We must find a solution to all the open issues so that our northern neighbour can continue on their Euro-Atlantic path.”

The Western powers, led by the United States, have placed maximum pressure on both countries to resolve the dispute with the aim of enabling Macedonia to join the NATO alliance, as part of Washington’s military escalation along Russia’s border. This effort was spearheaded by NATO General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg, who made a two-day official visit to Macedonia last month. During the visit he addressed the country’s parliament in the capital Skopje, urging a solution to a dispute that “has weighed on this region—and this country—for far too long.”

The issue has been used repeatedly by successive Greek governments to stoke nationalist sentiments as a means of deflecting social tensions outwards towards an external foe—in this case one of the most impoverished countries in Europe with an effective unemployment rate of 45 percent.

Huge rallies in the early 1990s, when the dispute first arose, played no small part in legitimising far-right discourse in Greece. It was during this period that Golden Dawn first emerged as a political group.

Today far-right forces are again seeking to utilise the dispute. That they are able to do so is chiefly the responsibility of Syriza, which formed a coalition with the far-right Independent Greeks (ANEL) three years ago, after being swept into power on an anti-austerity ticket.

Once the Syriza-led government betrayed its anti-austerity mandate—signing a third bailout package with Greece’s creditors just a few weeks after Greek workers and youth

delivered a resounding rejection of austerity in the July 2015 referendum—the road was open for the far-right to exploit popular anger.

Far from resisting this rightward lurch, sections of the pseudo-left in Greece are adapting themselves to it. In a statement following the rally, Panagiotis Lafazanis, the leader of Syriza splinter Popular Unity (LAE), struck a nationalist pose as defender of the Greek capitalist state. He declared, “We do not underestimate the irredentism of FYROM, nor the efforts of our neighbour to hijack the region’s ancient history.”

Former Speaker of the Greek Parliament and ex-Syriza MP, Zoi Konstantopoulou—who left the party making a few leftist noises about Syriza’s austerity agenda—declared her hope in the run-up to the rally that “Syntagma Square will be flooded with people... [L]et it be Macedonia that becomes the pretext for people to stand on their feet again, rise up, strive and gather once again at Syntagma.”

The Stalinist Communist Party of Greece (KKE), in a statement last year, called for “for an end to irredentist propaganda, for a mutual recognition of the inviolability of borders and the territorial integrity and sovereignty of both countries.”

Mikis Theodorakis, the veteran composer of many of the songs associated with the anti-junta struggle during 1967-74, was the main speaker at the Athens rally. Referring to himself as an “internationalist patriot,” he railed against the Syriza government as ethno-nihilists, declaring that he “always fought against fascism in all its forms, above all in its most devious, treacherous and dangerous form, the ‘left-wing’ one.”

Theodorakis is the embodiment of a generation of radical opportunists who began to shift to the right after they betrayed the militant struggles of the European working class, during the late 1960s and early 1970s. As a leading figure within the KKE, he was instrumental in paving the way for the restoration of bourgeois democracy in Greece after the fall of the colonels. He famously declared that the only option was either “[the exiled conservative statesman Konstantinos] Karamanlis or the tanks.”

With the integration of the KKE into bourgeois politics after the fall of the colonels, Theodorakis was an MP for the party from 1981 until 1990 when he defected to the conservative New Democracy, serving as a minister without portfolio for more than two years in Constantine Mitsotakis’ administration.

Theodorakis’ speech was greeted enthusiastically by the far-right, including Golden Dawn MP Ilias Kasidiaris, who tweeted, “Mikis began from Ioannis Metaxas’ EON[1930s fascistic youth organisation] and closed his circle at the rally next to patriots and nationalists! All intermediate stances and

backflips are struck off.”

Theodorakis shot back at critics who balked at such a brazen association with the far-right, declaring that Golden Dawn members also love their country, “albeit in a pugnacious manner.”

The Independent Greeks issued a press release after the Athens rally stating, “The term ‘Macedonia’ that Skopje seek to adopt sums up the irredentism of our neighbouring state. Every nation-state has specific characteristics, such as a common history, and if these characteristics that constitute it are eroded then it leads to its disintegration.”

Syriza is opposing none of this, with Tsipras echoing the nationalist poison of his coalition partners this week when he declared: “Through these negotiations the country is being called upon not to give, but to take back. To convince her neighbours to stop using the term ‘Macedonia’ with no qualifiers, to stop all irredentist references everywhere, to convince them not to usurp symbols and names that don’t belong to them.”

Workers and youth in Greece should take these developments as a warning. Conscious that the Syriza-led government is despised by wide sections of the working class, a significant section of Greece’s elite has concluded that it can no longer rely on democratic norms to impose its austerity agenda.

The main speaker at the Thessaloniki rally was retired General Frangkoulis Frangos, who in 2011 was cashiered by then-Prime Minister George Papandreou amid rumours that he was planning a coup against his social democratic PASOK government. Since then Frangos’ name has been linked to initiatives to form a populist far-right party.



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