Greek parliament votes in support of Macedonia name change

Katerina Selin
30 January 2019

Greece's parliament voted Friday to ratify an agreement that changes the name of its northern neighbour Macedonia, which has been officially known since the early 1990s as FYROM (the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia).

In July, the two countries' prime ministers, Alexis Tsipras and Zoran Zaev, agreed on the new name, the Republic of North Macedonia, at a meeting near the border at Lake Prespa, which has shores in Greece, Macedonia and Albania. The agreement brought to an end a decades-long dispute over Macedonia's name.

The Prespa agreement, which has been enthusiastically welcomed by the media and politicians in Europe and the US as a historic peace deal, in reality pursues reactionary goals. It is aimed at paving the way for the rapid integration of the small Balkan country into NATO and the European Union (EU).

Athens blocked that process for years with the nationalist argument that northern areas of the country might be up for grabs if its neighbour used the name Macedonia, which is also the historical name for a province in that region of Greece.

Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left), the governing party, was dependent on the votes of other parties to pass the agreement. A slim majority of 153 out of the 300 deputies voted for the deal. Together with Syriza (145 votes), other backers of the deal included deputies from the liberal Potami, deputy Katerina Papakosta, who was a member of the conservative New Democracy (ND) until 2017 and joined Tsipras' cabinet last year, one representative of the social-democratic Dimar and two deputies of Syriza's far-right coalition partner, the Independent Greeks (Anel). Voting against were the opposition parties ND, the Movement for Change (Kinal, which also includes the former social democratic PASOK), the Stalinist Communist Party of Greece (KKE), the conservative-liberal Enosi Kentron, deputies from Anel, and the neo-Nazi Chrysi Avgi (Golden Dawn). There was one abstention.

The parliamentary debate, which extended over several days, was accompanied by demonstrations of right-wing extremist and nationalist forces opposed to the change of name. Over 100,000 people gathered in front of the Greek parliament on Sunday prior to the vote and clashed violently with the police. Right-wing thugs sought to force their way into the parliament building. The police responded with a violent crackdown and fired tear gas. On Thursday, when the vote was originally scheduled, further protests took place. The neo-Nazis from Golden Dawn chanted right-wing extremist slogans in parliament and accused the government of betrayal.

The Stalinist KKE and LAE (Popular Unity), which emerged out of a split from Syriza, held their own protests outside the US embassy in Athens.

The KKE also opposed the Prespa deal on nationalist grounds. In the parliamentary debate, KKE general secretary Dimitris Koutsoumbas explained his party's vote in opposition to the deal by saying that "the fundamental source of irredentism [territorial claims on the part of Macedonia] still exists." References to a Macedonian people, and a Macedonian nationality and language could lead to future challenges on Macedonia's part. At the demonstration, he described the KKE's position as "patriotic."

Zoe Konstantopoulou, former parliamentary speaker for Syriza and now leader of the pseudo-left Course of Freedom (Plevsi Eleftherias), called in the newspaper *Ta Nea* for a referendum on the deal.

Negotiations to resolve the name dispute began a year ago, when the Greek and Macedonian prime ministers met at the World Economic Forum in Davos. In February, right-wing demonstrations dominated by the Greek Orthodox Church, sections of the military and Golden Dawn took place against the talks.

One of the most vehement proponents of this ultra-nationalist opposition is Panos Kammenos, leader of Anel and until recently defence minister in Tsipras' government. A few days after the Macedonian parliament voted on January 11 to accept the agreement, Kammenos resigned from his post, telling members of his party in parliament to reject the deal and end their support for the coalition government.

Tsipras then tabled a vote of confidence in his government in parliament, and was able to secure victory thanks to a handful of rebel Anel deputies. This removed speculation about an immediate end to the Syriza government for the time being. However, it remains uncertain whether the government can remain in office until elections scheduled for the autumn.

By forming a coalition with Anel in 2015, Tsipras nourished and strengthened the ultra-right forces who are now outraged at the Macedonia agreement. He relied on them to drown the anger of the working class toward his austerity policies in nationalist reaction. Although Kammenos' resignation called the government's continued existence into question, he and Tsipras praised each other and exchanged words of thanks for close and trustworthy collaboration.

With Kammenos' blessing, Tsipras used the resignation of the defence minister to strengthen the far-right and militarist tendencies in the state. He appointed the supreme commander of the Greek armed forces, Evangelos Apostolakis, as defence minister.

The online *publication* militaire.gr, which speaks for the Greek armed forces, was delighted, writing, "The left-wing Tsipras, who they all said would dissolve the armed forces, appoints a member of the armed forces in Evangelos Apostolakis as defence minister. This is the first time since the fall of the junta that something like this has happened, and it's a positive step."

Tsipras gave Apostolakis "full freedom to select the leadership team that he thinks will get the most done. Apostolakis' demands are well known, operational readiness, a rapid reorganisation of the armed forces, and the concentration of the existing weapons arsenal," noted *militaire.gr* .

The Prespa agreement is fully endorsed by the EU, NATO, and the US. This is due to concrete political considerations. They are pressing ahead urgently with North Macedonia's integration into NATO and the EU to

© World Socialist Web Site

push back Russia and China, who are also trying to secure their interests in the region.

The struggle for spheres of influence in the Balkans has a long and bloody history. Due to its location on the fault lines of Europe, Asia and North Africa, the area was transformed prior to and during the First World War into a battlefield for the European great powers.

The Greek-Macedonian conflict, like other smoldering flashpoints in the region, is the direct product of Western imperialist intervention in the Balkans during the 1990s. Confronted with mounting working class resistance to the devastating consequences of capitalist restoration, the ruling elites in the former Yugoslav republics deliberately incited national, ethnic and religious tensions to divide the workers and break their resistance.

They were supported in this strategy by the Western powers, above all Germany and the US, who had an interest in dividing up the Balkans, to better exert their dominance over it. This resulted in ethnic cleansing and horrific wars. NATO ultimately intervened in 1999 to destroy what remained of Yugoslavia. The result was the breakup of Yugoslavia, a country with 23 million inhabitants, into no fewer than seven individual states.

The wars have left behind numerous bitter conflicts that can be incited at any time and exploited for political interests. The Balkan region threatens to become a powder keg once again.

The shadow of Great Power conflicts also hung over the West Balkan conference in London last July, which concluded without any concrete outcomes. Although the EU plans to invest up to €150 million [$US196 million] in the region during 2019 and 2020, it has ruled out accepting any new members prior to 2025. At the same time, fears are growing that rivals could gain a foothold in the Balkans. The *Financial Times* warned ominously of a "vacuum which other powers—China and Russia—want to fill."

China intends to involve the states in southeastern Europe into its plans for a new Silk Road, and has invested substantially in the region's infrastructure. Last July, Greek parliament speaker and Syriza politician Nikos Voutsis promised in an interview with the Chinese news agency Xinhua that the Prespa agreement would also benefit Beijing. It would help "to open the New Silk Road initiative to trade." The assurances to China underscore that the deal to resolve the naming dispute will not bring peace and stability to the Balkans, but in fact will further incite conflicts.

The German bourgeoisie in particular hopes that it can expand its field of economic exploitation further into the Balkans through North Macedonia and combine it with its economic crushing of Greece. Germany played a leading role in the austerity dictates of Greece's international lenders, pushing for cuts and privatisations from which German companies now hope to profit.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel rushed to Athens prior to the vote on Macedonia to support her Greek counterpart. International media outlets praised Tsipras to the skies as they sought to defend him against resistance to the deal within Greece. The German daily *Die Welt* published a tribute to Tsipras, who had, at a time of a "leadership crisis in the West, proved he possessed rare statesmanlike qualities ... farsightedness, energy, and bravery." *The Financial Times* took a similar line in a piece entitled "How Greece's Alexis Tsipras went from firebrand to statesman."

High-ranking representatives of the EU and NATO celebrated the result of the parliamentary vote. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg described the deal as a "historic decision," which overcomes "a hurdle for the country's Euro-Atlantic integration." He praised "the leadership and bravery from Prime Minister Tsipras, and also from Prime Minister Zaev," and vowed to press ahead quickly with North Macedonia's acceptance as a NATO member. The *New York Times* stressed the significance of the deal for the US and Europe, and described it as a "win for the West."

EU Council President Donald Tusk tweeted triumphantly, "Zoran, Alexis—well done! Mission Impossible fulfilled." In a joint statement, EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Federica Mogherini, and EU Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations Johannes Hahn added that Skopje and Athens had "written a new chapter in our common EU future." European Parliament deputies Udo Bullmann (SPD), Ska Keller (Greens), and Gabi Zimmer (Left Party) reportedly went so far as to urge Tsipras's and Zaev's nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize.

For his part, Tsipras described the parliamentary vote as a "historic day," and wrote in an article at the weekend for the Greek *Economist* that 2019 would be a "historic year" where everyone can be "optimistic" once again. With cynical self-praise that will be recognised as an affront by every Greek worker and refugee, Tsipras wrote that in Greece "a progressive government has managed to get Greece out of the memorandums, secured financial stability, achieved justice for the majority, and conquered the refugee crisis with humanity and solidarity." The Prespa agreement was yet another success, he added.

Knowing full well that many cuts agreed on in the last year of Greece's bailout programme still have to take effect in 2019 and will further worsen the already terrible social situation, Tsipras resorted to an even more blatant lie. "A structural element of our strategy is redistribution," he wrote. He referred to planned wage increases, which amount to a drop in the bucket.

At home, Tsipras is using the dispute over Macedonia's name and the nationalist hysteria being whipped up by the opposition to divert attention away from the austerity measures and suppress the class struggle. The reality is that Syriza has organised one of the greatest transfers of wealth in Greek history, from the bottom to the top of society. The social consequences are horrendous. As the Prespa agreement was being debated in parliament, a review of Greece's reform progress by its international lenders took place, the second such review since the formal end of the bailout programme. Officials from the lenders pushed yet again for more privatisations and cuts.

Working class resistance to austerity policies and militarism must be directed against both factions of the ruling elite, the right-wing extremists just as much as the Syriza government, which has proven to be a loyal appendage of the US and European bourgeoisies. Only the unification of Greek workers with workers in the Balkans and throughout Europe in the fight to overthrow capitalism and establish a socialist Europe can put an end to the ruthless exploitation of the working class and the dangerous national rivalries.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site