

FYROM - the adventures of a name

An account of the political and diplomatic manoeuvring between Athens and Skopje, from FYROM's creation as an independent Balkan state to this day

1991

December 16

MEETING on a German initiative, the European Union foreign ministers' council - attended by then Greek foreign minister Antonis Samaras - accepts the breakup of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and effectively recognises the creation of Croatia, Slovenia and FYROM. The issue of Bosnia-Herzegovina remains open due to smouldering civil war. According to Samaras, the EU council also settled the FYROM name issue, but his views were not vindicated by developments, as the new state continued to be called 'Macedonia' in EU documents.



1992

February 10

GREEK President Constantine Karamanlis convenes a council of party leaders at the behest of Prime Minister Constantine Mitsotakis. Appearing at the council, Foreign Minister Samaras advises that Greece reject any appellation that contains the name 'Macedonia'. Relations between the premier and the foreign minister are clearly strained at this stage as a result of the FYROM issue, but the council of leaders adopts Samaras' position. Mitsotakis believes that his minister "trapped" the council. In view of Athens' reaction, and with tensions rising in Greece and among the Greek diaspora, the Portuguese EU presidency undertakes to draft a proposal to defuse the crisis.

February 14

Massive rally held in Thessaloniki to demand that Macedonia remain solely Greek.

March

Kiro Gligorov, then president of the newly-formed FYROM state, escalates the crisis by drafting a constitution. Approved by FYROM's parliament, the constitution refers to "Macedonian autonomy" and "the rights of Macedonian people living in neighbouring countries". The Greek side interprets a hint of expansionism in these terms. Gligorov



systematically promotes use of the term 'Macedonia' abroad.

April

Athens attempts to retaliate. Portuguese Foreign Minister Joao Píneiro proposes a compromise under which Greece would accept a composite name for the new state, with 'Nova Macedonia' (New Macedonia) as the main candidate. Foreign Minister Samaras rejects the Píneiro proposal at a time when the Greek government seemed ready for a more moderate stance. Constantine Mitsotakis was reportedly prepared to accept the name 'Slavomacedonia'.

April 13

The Greek council of party leaders meets for a second time, culminating in the dismissal of Foreign Minister Samaras by the Mitsotakis administration. The minister first learns of his defenestration on television. A few months later, Samaras will break away from the New Democracy party and form the Political Spring party, bringing about the fall of the Mitsotakis government.

June 26



The Greek government ultimately decides to reject the Píneiro proposal, blocking its approval at the EU summit in Lisbon which comes on the heels of a large march in Athens. Greece's fellow EU member-states agree not to recognise FYROM as 'Macedonia', and the United Nations is gradually drawn into the debate. Many observers now say that the Portuguese EU presidency had proposed the best solution to the problem. In the eyes of the international community, Greece bears full responsibility for the deadlock.

August 11

Kiro Gligorov hardens his stance in presenting the new state's flag. FYROM's colours carry the Sun of Vergina, a symbol unearthed in 1976 by archaeologist Manolis Andronikos during an excavation of royal Macedonian tombs in northern Greece. Gligorov's move draws a strong reaction from the Greek government and the international community.

December

Street demonstrations break out in several cities both inside and outside Greece, in countries with a strong Greek diaspora presence. FYROM accuses Greece of threatening its sovereignty, and Gligorov attempts to raise sympathy among the international community.

1993

April 7

WITH the approval of the Greek government, the FYROM issue comes under the responsibility of the United Nations.

Domestic critics note that referring the issue to the UN, instead of discussing it within the EU, robs Greece of its EU veto advantage. A UN commission under Cyrus Vance begins work on a compromise solution. At Greek suffering, the UN temporarily recognises the new state as the 'Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia'. In the summer of 1993, the Russian Federation moves to recognise the new state as 'Republic of Macedonia'. Other Eastern European countries follow suit, as does China. In Athens, Constantine Mitsotakis causes an outcry by arguing that "we'll have forgotten the name issue in ten years".

September

The secession of New Democracy MP George Symbilidis, a close friend of ousted foreign minister Antonis Samaras, eliminates the parliamentary majority of the Mitsotakis administration, forcing it to abdicate. One of the main reasons put forward by Symbilidis for his decision was the government's handling of the FYROM issue. Pasok and Andreas Papandreou return to power in the following month, with Papandreou stressing that Greece's position on the issue remains grounded in the party leaders' decision of February 1992.

1994

February



FYROM intransigence leads the Papandreou administration to impose an economic embargo on the neighbouring country, cutting off all traffic from the port of Thessaloniki and banning the export and import of all goods and raw materials to and from Skopje. Medicine and health-related supplies

are exempt, but special restrictions are also placed on oil traffic.

March

The European Commission sues Greece over the embargo at the European Court of Justice. Greece wins the case, as the court rules that economic embargo of FYROM does not contravene any EU member-state treaties. Behind the scenes, the UN attempts to broker a deal similar to the Píneiro proposals, only to have the offer rejected by Greece.

1995

September 13

GREEK Foreign Minister Karolos Papoulias signs the so-called Intermediate Agreement with FYROM, an understanding that remains in force to this day. Greece agreed to lift the embargo, while FYROM removed the Sun of Vergina from its flag and modified its constitution, dropping all revisionist references deemed as aggressive by Athens. The Intermediate Agreement left the name issue pending, and the two sides agreed to open a new round of UN-supervised talks to deal with it.

1997

January

MEETINGS on the name issue at UN level fail to bring results, and Greece decides to

block EU economic aid to FYROM. At the same time, however, Athens encourages the incursion of Greek investors in the FYROM market, and works to ease tension with Skopje. The Kosovo crisis that is soon to erupt opens several fronts in FYROM (a refugee influx from Kosovo, an Albanian minority uprising that brings the country to the brink of war etc), and bilateral talks with Greece wane.



2001

FYROM and the EU sign a stability and association agreement, but talks with Greece in New York on the name issue remain fruitless. The Intermediate Agreement of 1995 had an expiration date of late 2001, with the provision that it would be renewed every year as regards the name issue.

2004

November 4

THE UNITED STATES officially recognise FYROM as the 'Republic of Macedonia'. On October 11, US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld had flown to Skopje to sign a bilateral defence agreement in which FYROM was also referred to as 'Macedonia'. It should be noted that two weeks ago, the German parliament had also supported the recognition of FYROM as 'Macedonia', a position which Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder did not support.

SOURCE: TA NEA DAILY

