

Macedonia Changes Name, Moves Closer to NATO Membership

Updated February 19, 2019 (IN10977)

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On February 12, 2019, Macedonia formally changed its name to become the [Republic of North Macedonia](#). The name change resolves a long-standing dispute with Greece and is expected to clear the path for North Macedonia to become NATO's 30th member. U.S. and European Union (EU) officials believe NATO enlargement to the Western Balkans could help stabilize the region and counter Russian influence. Many Members of Congress have long supported Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration.

Prespa Agreement with Greece

North Macedonia's NATO membership bid was delayed due to a nearly three-decade bilateral dispute with neighboring Greece over Macedonia's name. The dispute stems from Macedonia's 1991 declaration of independence from Yugoslavia as the Republic of Macedonia. From Greece's perspective, the new republic's use of the name *Macedonia* implied territorial ambitions toward Greece's northern province of Macedonia and a broader claim to ancient Macedonia's cultural heritage. In response, Greece wielded its veto power to block Macedonia's pursuit of NATO and EU membership despite generally positive assessments of Macedonia's qualifications.

In 2017, newly elected Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev took office pledging to redouble efforts to resolve the country's bilateral dispute with Greece and further its overarching goal of Euro-Atlantic integration. In June 2018, Greece and Macedonia signed the Prespa Agreement, whereby Macedonia would change its name to the Republic of North Macedonia, Greece would no longer block Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration, and both countries would promise to respect existing borders.

The Prespa Agreement's enactment was far from certain. It required legislative action in the Greek and Macedonian parliaments, where both governments faced sharp challenges from nationalist opponents. To the surprise of some observers, in January 2019, the Macedonian and Greek governments were [successful](#), albeit with slim vote margins. Prime Minister Zaev and Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras expended political capital in the process: Zaev's government accepted a controversial [amnesty](#) of some opposition lawmakers to secure their legislative support for the Prespa Agreement, and Tsipras narrowly survived a no-confidence vote.

Although the country's name is now the Republic of North Macedonia, the agreement specifies that its language and citizens will remain "Macedonian." Some analysts believe the Prespa Agreement could set a powerful example of [compromise](#) for parties to other seemingly intractable disputes in the Balkans, such as between Serbia and Kosovo.

Prime Ministers Zaeu and Tsipras have been [nominated](#) for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Next Steps

On February 6, 2019, Macedonia [signed](#) its NATO accession protocol. For North Macedonia to join the alliance, NATO's 29 members now must ratify the [protocol](#) in accordance with domestic procedures. On February 8, 2019, Greece became the first NATO member to ratify the protocol. In the United States, the Senate is responsible for protocol ratification (by two-thirds majority). If all 29 NATO members approve the protocol, the NATO secretary-general would formally invite North Macedonia to accede to NATO's Washington Treaty. In the [final step](#), North Macedonia would be able to approve its NATO membership through a referendum or a parliamentary vote and submit this decision to the U.S. Department of State, which is the formal "guardian" of the Washington Treaty.

Although the ratification process typically takes one year, some analysts speculate that the allies may attempt to complete the process before a NATO summit scheduled for December 2019 to [leverage the symbolic value](#) of the alliance's 30th member joining in the same year it celebrates its 70th anniversary.

In addition to securing NATO membership, the Zaeu government hopes to launch accession negotiations with the European Union this year. In 2005, Macedonia became the first country in the Western Balkans to achieve EU candidate status. However, its progress subsequently stalled amid domestic political crises and the name dispute with Greece.

Based on a positive assessment of North Macedonia's progress in 2018, the European Commission [recommended](#) that the EU initiate accession negotiations. However, in June 2018, EU member state leaders delayed the launch of negotiations until 2019, subject to North Macedonia's progress in implementing reforms.

Russian Influence

Proponents of North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration believe NATO membership could help stabilize the Western Balkans and [prevent renewed ethnic conflict](#) within North Macedonia. Some analysts also argue that NATO membership could help counter growing Russian influence. Russia, which opposes NATO enlargement in the Balkans, continues to challenge the legitimacy of the Prespa Agreement and [claims that the West "forced"](#) North Macedonia into NATO.

In North Macedonia, Russian [influence](#) allegedly includes disinformation campaigns, a proliferation of Russia-Macedonia friendship organizations, and Kremlin support for nationalist forces that rely on disruptive tactics. In July 2018, Greece [expelled](#) two Russian diplomats who were accused of providing funding for anti-Prespa protests. In September 2018, then-U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis accused Russia of backing a campaign to boycott a Macedonian referendum on changing the country's name.

Some analysts have expressed concern that Moscow could attempt to intervene as North Macedonia moves closer to the final stages of its NATO membership bid. Russia was accused of orchestrating an [unsuccessful coup attempt](#) in nearby Montenegro in 2016 to prevent it from joining the alliance. Macedonian officials have [cautioned](#) that a lengthy accession process would give Russia more opportunities to meddle.

U.S. Support for Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic Integration

Since 1991, successive U.S. administrations and many Members of Congress have strongly supported North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration and urged North Macedonia and Greece to resolve their bilateral dispute. With U.S. support, North Macedonia joined NATO's Partnership for Peace in 1995 and launched its Membership Action Plan in 1999. North Macedonia has contributed to NATO operations in Kosovo and Afghanistan.

Many Members of Congress supported Greece and Macedonia's negotiations to resolve their bilateral dispute and continue to support North Macedonia's NATO accession. Many Members in both chambers welcomed the 2018 Prespa Agreement and urged both parties to finalize it. On February 6, 2019, the Chairman and Ranking Member of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs wrote an [open letter](#) to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo urging the Administration to back North Macedonia's expeditious accession.