

# Recent Presidential Elections in Macedonia in the context of the *Prespa Agreement* & Macedonian History

**Skopje, Macedonia - Sunday 05 May 2019**

The government candidate Stevo Pendarovski (SDSM party) has won 55% of votes in the second round of presidential voting. The opposition candidate Gordana Siljanovska (VMRO-DPMNE party) has won 45%. Pendarovski will now be sworn in as President of the Republic of North Macedonia, which is largely a ceremonial position, although the President constitutionally is the commander-in-chief of the armed forces & has a role in foreign affairs. Around 42% of the total registered voters turned out to vote. In the first round of voting, 2 weeks ago, only 41% turned out, when neither candidate reached 50%, & the third candidate (Albanian parties) with the lowest vote was eliminated; over 40% need to turn out for the vote to be constitutionally valid. On January 2019 the Macedonian parliament voted 80-to-120 (minimum two thirds requirement) to change the constitution to implement the *Prespa Agreement* with Greece, after opposition MPs defected from VMRO-OPMNE to vote with the governing SDSM coalition in order to reach that number. On 30 September 2018, approx. 92% of the people who voted in the Referendum voted to accept the Prespa Agreement, but the turn-out of registered voters was only 36.9%, after a boycott was successfully mobilized. Accordingly, the result was not constitutionally valid.

## **Background**

The Prespa Agreement was signed on 17 June 2018 by the governments of Macedonia & Greece. against significant, popular opposition in the two countries, & amongst both of their emigre communities internationally. It ended a 27-year stand-off between the two countries over the name Macedonia. The Republic of Macedonia was one of six constituent Republics of the federation of Yugoslavia, which dissolved into war in 1991-95; it had achieved limited autonomy in 1944 in the new post-war federal Yugoslavia, when it was known as the *Peoples' Republic of Macedonia*. It changed its name to the *Socialist Republic of Macedonia* in 1974.

Following a successful popular referendum on 08 September 1991, the country established itself as a sovereign & independent state, constitutionally known as the *Republic of Macedonia*, under which name it was eventually recognized bilaterally by 147 nations. However, Greece, which had only started referring to its own province of northern Greece as *Macedonia* in 1988 objected to the newly independent nation's name, & an enforced economic blockade persisted until 1995. Greece's position politically is that it does not recognize the existence of a modern Macedonian nation nor the ethnicity, culture, religion & language of the Macedonian people. Moreover, it actively works to deny the rights of, & to denationalize the Macedonian minority living within northern Greece, a region which Macedonians refer to as *Aegean Macedonia*. Despite being regularly found guilty of breaches of international laws guaranteeing human & minority rights in international tribunals regarding its Macedonian & other minorities, Greece strongly maintains this position.

Historically, Greece claims that *Macedonia* refers to the territory of the ancient Macedonians, such as Philip & Alexander (the Great), who are claimed as Greek, despite strong evidence to the contrary, & despite the fact that at the time there was no Greek state as such. The claim of historical lineage to the ancient Macedonians & their land is asserted cynically to defeat the rights of Macedonians to claim a modern homeland, a culture & a language. After all, there is no other nation in the world today which is called *Macedonia*, nor is there another nation which refers to its culture & language as *Macedonian*, a fact accepted today by the vast majority of the global community & which, unsurprisingly, recognizes the Macedonian nation, its state, its culture & language.

### **How has the Prespa Agreement altered the geo-polite issues relevant to the *Macedonian* question?**

Macedonia was a part of the Ottoman Turkish empire for over 5 centuries, until 1912. The entire Balkan region or south-eastern Europe was a part of this empire during that period. In the 19th century, with the assistance of the powerful Western European nations, small nations gradually won their independence from Ottoman Turkey, & by 1900 only Macedonia, Thrace & Albania remained under the Empire's rule. When Greece became independent in 1828, the Greek state did not include any part of Macedonia as very few Greeks were living there. Indeed, in the traditional Macedonian capital, Salonica, less than 15% of the population were registered as Greek-speaking. Similarly, when Bulgaria & Serbia gained independence from Ottoman Turkey in 1878, those states did not include any territory, which was a part of Macedonia; this changed in 1912-13.

The Macedonian uprising for independence from Ottoman Turkey in 1903 failed. The alliance of states forming the Balkan League attacked & defeated Turkey in 1912, with the key battles fought in Macedonia. Where the respective armies met the victorious states redrew the map of Macedonia by effecting a partition of its territory, with Greece acquiring 50%, Serbia 38% & Bulgaria the remainder, 12%. After a brief war between the allies themselves in 1913, the partition of Macedonian territory as described above was ratified with the *Treaty of Bucharest* on 10 August 1913, & again following WWI with the *Treaty of Versailles* in 1919. Except for a minor alteration to the borders in 1920, when Albanian independence was ratified, with the granting of a narrow strip of Macedonian territory to Albania (Mala Prespe), the international borders have not changed since.

The Balkan states (Greece, Serbia/Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Albania) all actively denationalized their Macedonian populations between the two world wars, but in the new post war, Yugoslavia recreated a federal socialist system which saw the establishment of the autonomous Macedonian republic (refer above), enabling the further development under relative freedom of the Macedonian culture, language & religion. Macedonian political, social, educational, cultural & religious institutions were established within the parameters of the socialist federal system in Yugoslavia. In the neighboring states of Greece, Bulgaria & Albania, however, Macedonians remained unrecognized & an oppressed minority.

### **Post-Independence**

The Greek blockade (1991-95) badly damaged the nascent Macedonian economy. Greece opposed the republic & Macedonia's membership of the *United Nations (UN)*. Ultimately, in 1993, Macedonia was given UN membership under the temporary description of, *Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia*, with the UN directing Greece & Macedonia to negotiate the permanence of the name under UN mediator Matthew Nimitz. These negotiations lasted until the Prespa Agreement in 2018. Greece eventually lifted its blockade in 1995 when a provisional agreement between the states saw Macedonia amend its constitution & change its flag. In addition to lifting the economic blockade, Greece agreed not to block any Macedonian application for membership of NATO & the EU. Greece breached the agreement when Macedonia applied for NATO membership subsequently by applying veto, & Macedonia then successfully sued Greece in the world court (ICJ).

### **Prespa Agreement**

After the Social Democrats (SDSM) ended ten years VMRO-DPMNE governments, with strong Western support, in 2016 (in unconstitutional circumstances the SDSM coalition government, with Albanian minority parties, worked with the similarly left wing government coalition in Greece led by the Syriza party to conclude an agreement on the *name dispute*. A wide-ranging agreement was signed at the border region of Lake Prespa in June 2018, providing a *solution* to the name dispute, & a range of cooperative measures in numerous fields: economic, social, political, scientific, educational, etc. On the name issue, Macedonia agreed to change its name to *North Macedonia*, & again to amend parts of its constitution found offensive by Greece, largely relating to the sovereign Macedonian

state's constitutional role as a protector & promulgator of the Macedonian people, & its rights, culture, language & so forth across the Balkans & across the world. For its part, Greece undertook in the agreement, which is expressed to be *irreversible*, to encourage & promote Macedonian membership in NATO & the ELI, & never again to exercise its veto in this regard.

Amongst key provisions of the Prespa Agreement, *Article 7* stipulates that the two parties agree to a *subjective* interpretation of the term *Macedonian* & its usage. Greece will use it as connoting the historical lineage of that state encompassing the ancient Macedonian kingdoms on that territory & its civilization & culture in perpetuity to the present time, & Macedonia agrees with the Greek right to such usage. North Macedonia will use the terminology as a descriptor of the people presently occupying the territory of North Macedonia (only), & its nationality, citizenship, language & culture, & Greece agrees with the Macedonian right to such usage.

The implications of the Agreement, in terms specifically of *Article 7* are profound. For the first time ever, Greece effectively recognizes a distinct *Macedonian* national identity & entity, with its own language & culture, but only to the extent that this entity occupies, or emanates from the Republic of North Macedonia. Macedonia effectively accepts that the territory of the ancient Macedonian kingdoms, to the extent that they are essentially represented by the current region of northern Greece, & the culture of that specific region, has been an inextricable part of the Greek nation since antiquity, & that therefore no person who has ever lived in or emanated from this region can use the terminology to describe him/herself as *Macedonian*, other than in the sense of being Greek. This of course has disenfranchised this entire facet of Macedonian heritage in the sense that with the Prespa Agreement both sides now agree that there is not now, nor has there ever been, an Aegean Macedonia, or an Aegean Macedonian, whether in terms of the current minority population there now, or anyone who claims to have emanated from there, such as the hundreds of thousands of descendants of that part of Macedonia currently living in Australia, Canada, USA, South America & Eastern Europe.

For these reasons, the Prespa Agreement has engendered enormous disquiet and opposition from what is reliably believed to be a majority of both Macedonian & Greek populations within those countries & beyond. This certainly extends not only to the vociferous, & more hardline nationalistic elements of such opposition, but indeed to a significant number of more moderate elements who have elected to suffer in silence through this process.

Evidence of this comes in the fact that as yet the Greek people, large demonstrations aside, have not formally nor legally been asked for their views on the Prespa Agreement, with ratifications of the agreement having simply passed through the Greek parliament by a slim majority, upon the application of enormous pressure & political maneuvering by the US & ELI, once the Macedonian side had completed its own processes pursuant to the agreement.

In Macedonia, orchestration of a successful universal voting boycott has seen extraordinarily low voter turn-out for the referendum (at 36.9% less than the constitutional requirement for validity & only marginally above 40% in the two rounds of presidential voting. The parliamentary vote resulting in the two-thirds of MPs needed for the constitutional amendments saw the required number gained only after the defection of opposition MPs, amongst strong allegations of bribery & corruption, & with the orchestration of inordinate influence by US & EU representatives.

**So, what sort of mandate & legitimacy can the current SDSM coalition government & the new president really claim from the Macedonian? Likewise, the Greek government?**

Perhaps only free & fair national elections due in both countries within the next 6 to 18 months will finally answer this question. However, the Prespa Agreement, *prima facie*, is not only valid & binding under international law, but is specifically expressed to be *unrepealable* in its key provisions.

The most potentially sinister aspects of the agreement, however, appear to lie within the enforcement provisions. Both governments are required, as part of carrying out the states' legal obligations under the agreement, to proscribe any activity dissenting from both the spirit & letter of its provisions, to declare them as such, & to notify the other party of such breach. This must effectively work in practice as a letter upon the rights of Macedonian individuals & organizations from democratically exercising their rights to promote a view alternate to the new *reality* about the history & roots of, in particular, Macedonians who have origins from the Aegean region of Macedonia as well as those who simply wish to promulgate an alternative, yet traditional view of Macedonian history, culture & politics. The imperative which emerges from the Agreement in this regard, given the likely enforcement actions by the respective governments may easily fall into a regime suppression of views & actions & which are seen as contrary to the pragmatic interests of the self-interested politician who are driving this process.

It may, sadly but invariably also drive a permanent wedge between those with roots from the Republic of Macedonia who seemingly have no or little qualification upon their rights to identify as Macedonians., & those with roots from the Aegean region of *Macedonka*, who have now ceased to exist, & have never existed in that guise. Even though Macedonians from these two contiguous regions &, by extension those from the Pirin region of Macedonia in Bulgaria & the Male Prespa region of Macedonia in Albania, are essentially one & the same, ethnically, culturally & linguistically as a direct result of these new circumstances. Aegean Macedonians must inevitably lose their sense of dose affinity with the Republic of Macedonia, which had slowly but steadily built up since 1944, even in the face of enormous Greek propaganda, to the benefit of the entire Macedonian nation as such. That has now been placed in severe jeopardy, as Macedonians from the Aegean region, once again, become *stateless* as a result of the Prespa accords.

For the general Macedonian population, including those living within &/or with roots from the Republic, the primary issue now becomes whether the state structure known as the Republic of North Macedonia is able to claim any moral authority at all over the population residing there or over its diaspora. Is North Macedonia, in reality, merely a pseudo-state within a state? Will a dissonance manifest itself between the state structure, on the one hand & whose legitimacy has been heavily emasculated by questionable legal/constitutional, political & moral behavior, & what may be called the *Macedonian Movement* on the other, encompassing anyone who legitimately dams a Macedonian heritage? By what authority can the institutions of governance in the Republic, without express consent, claim to be able to *negotiate* about the inalienable right of people to a subjective identity of choice vested heavily in their historical & cultural experiences & practices, both at a national & an individual level, & a right which very clearly is not only limited to persons currently living in the Republic, but also extends to those anywhere who claim the Macedonian heritage?

The truly great shame of this episode seems to be that the Prespa Agreement, in its various manifestations, will not deliver the socio-economic panacea which has been promised to its citizens. The completion of its accession agreement, according to official sources in the ELI will not occur until 2035, at the earliest. Furthermore, what form will it take given the recent economic experiences of Greece are anything to go by? How & when will expansive free markets, set against rigidly increasing European regulatory bureaucratization, readily assist the citizens of one of Europe's poorer nations? What have the tragically misguided, self-serving, cynical & corrupt political cadres in Skopje given away on behalf of us all in order to attempt to realize the false hope of a never-to-be-achieved economic prosperity, especially after a century or more of our people enduring enormous deprivation & regular national humiliation?

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