Symbolic identities: Understanding the Macedonia name dispute and its implications for EU politics

Efforts to end the Macedonia name dispute suffered a blow on 30 September when a referendum proposing to change the country's name to 'North Macedonia' failed to reach the required 50 per cent threshold. However, the country's Prime Minister, Zoran Zaev, later won a vote in parliament on the issue on 19 October. **Charalambos Tsekeris** *and* **Nicolas Demertzis** *write that it is now difficult to predict where the process will lead, but the issue gives some insight into the issues politicians encounter when attempting to reframe national identities from above.*

Despite the best efforts of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia's pro-Western Prime Minister Zoran Zaev, as well as huge Western support for him, the 30 September name-change referendum results were rather disappointing.

Turnout did not meet the required 50 per cent threshold and the 'North Macedonia' proposal (linked with hopes of joining the European Union and NATO) ultimately failed on constitutional grounds. Obviously, such a proposal contradicts the way in which most citizens in the country perceive themselves, their self-identity and national narratives. Although Zaev eventually did get a positive vote in parliament for constitutional changes in accordance with the Prespa Agreement he reached with Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras in June, the future still seems highly unpredictable and uncertain.

The EU's Federica Mogherini and Johannes Hahn with Zoran Zaev and Alexis Tsipras during the signing ceremony of the agreement between Skopje and Athens at Prespa lake on 17 June 2018, Credit: EEAS (CC BY-NC 2.0)

In Greece, the restarting of diplomatic negotiations in early February 2018 with its northern neighbour, and efforts to settle the naming dispute under the auspices of the United Nations and the European Union, have triggered a sudden, emotionally charged uprising of a large part of Greek society against the use of the name "Macedonia" (including its derivatives). As recent polls have demonstrated, a majority of people in Greece are strongly against the Prespa Agreement.

According to an extensive quantitative survey on Greek public attitudes, a large majority of participants (71.5 per cent) reject any reference to the term 'Macedonia' as a part of any future solution, while only 22.5 per cent responded that they could accept a composite name that would include the term 'Macedonia'. Interestingly, this survey shows that the 'uncomprising' camp (i.e. those who would like no reference to the term 'Macedonia' or a derivative of that word) has sharply increased in size in the last two years.

Symbolic identities

It is evident that it is the Greek radical social imaginary (and its permanent deep attachment to classical antiquity), rather than the mass media, online networks, or the structure of the political party system, that actually affects and actively shapes public opinion against the name claims. In the meantime, new generations in both countries have been added, who have no substantive access to the near and distant past, as well as to actual historical experiences concerning the disputed issue. In particular, the attraction of the young to political extremes and radical parties has grown over time. To a large degree, these generations are also against any compromise to the decades-old row between Athens and Skopje, including the 'North Macedonia' proposal.

Yet, more generally, little attention has been paid to the sharp and increasing discrepancy between public agendas and policymaking, between ordinary people's tendencies and governments' strategic targets and orientations (including EU governments). European and national policymaking authorities must recognise the crucial overlapping factors and underlying drivers that constantly feed emergent perplexities and global disorder, reinforce social unrest, and dangerously destabilise the political scene across Europe.

First, during the global financial crisis, populism and ethno-religious nationalism become highly attractive political options. They have a growing impact on all those who desperately search for more secure and meaningful lives and identities, suffer from a strong sense of economic stagnation or economic decline, and feel that the political establishment is inefficient and has failed them. Excluded, marginal and neglected citizens often cannot handle complexity and unpredictably react by voting for protest candidates/movements and supporting radical, yet oversimplified and inadequate, solutions to complex problems.

Second, the advent of social media gave rise to digital echo chambers and filter bubbles, allowing people to hear only the news, facts, opinions and stereotypes they wanted to hear. This has reduced their ability to handle different views, cultivating authoritarian notions of democracy, and expanding the reach of reactionist, radical or fringe ideas and conspiracy theories (especially in conditions of high socioeconomic inequality). Social media users often behave as *like-minded believers* who tend to create the virtual equivalent of gated communities, and are vulnerable to digital demagogy, manipulation, and both intentional and accidental misinformation. Such negative developments seriously destabilise the post-war foundations of liberal democracy and the political public sphere.

Third, specific demographics seem to be slowly revolting and seeking revenge for the perceived loss of continuity, certainty, control and identity associated with processes of globalisation, fragmentation and postmodern (or neoliberal) individualism. Understanding voters' incentives, motivations and choices could substantially improve democratic processes and their actual implementation.

Fourth, societies are complex adaptive systems that usually resist exogenous attempts to change them from outside or in an arrogant, centralised top-down way – something demonstrated by 'Goodhart's law', 'the principle of Le Chatelier', or the 'illusion of control'. Social imaginaries – that is, historically produced and deeply rooted flowing networks of values within each society –have a large dynamic impact on the path taken by the people and the system as a whole.

Lessons for the EU

The Macedonia name case illustrates the difficulty in imposing symbolic identities, beliefs, mindsets or worldviews on self-organised communities, which are strongly driven by radical imaginaries, especially in the era of identity politics. In addition, implicit social and cognitive biases, as nudgers say, are powerful forces that mostly function as systemic 'attractors' and heavily influence voters' judgements and behaviour, potentially creating complex vulnerabilities. Propaganda experts know well that it takes much time, energy and strategy for people to change their opinions.

Sailing in uncharted waters, EU policymakers and political elites urgently need to appreciate these multiple and complex processes to build new positive narratives and effectively grasp emerging political developments both inside and outside the Union. These are manifested as grievances, anti-immigration demands, anti-establishment and anti-elitist sentiment, anti-expert scepticism, authoritarianism, and mass support for populist anti-system parties. This will require the EU system to proactively overcome the very real shortcomings that have systematically fuelled these developments, while also emphasising what unites rather than divides societies.

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Note: The article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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