

Macedonia: A new beginning in relations with Greece

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The prime ministers of Macedonia and Greece met on 24 January in Davos for the first time since 2010. The topic of the meeting was the dispute over the name of the state, Macedonia, which has been the reason why Athens has been blocking Macedonia's progress towards NATO and EU membership since 2008. As part of building mutual trust, the prime minister of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, declared a readiness to rename Macedonia's main airport and motorway, named after Alexander the Great. In turn, Alexis Tsipras announced that Greece would cease blocking Macedonia's membership in the Adriatic-Ionian Initiative and would recommend the EU-Macedonia Stabilisation and Association Agreement for ratification in parliament. The meeting was followed by cross-party consultations in both countries, and the Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs announced that Athens would present a draft agreement regulating the disputed issues to the Macedonian partners in February this year.

Commentary

- The meeting of the prime ministers fits in with a series of initiatives from the left-wing government of Macedonia, which announced on the occasion of taking power in May 2017 that it would discontinue the foreign policy of its right-wing predecessors from VMRO-DPMNE, the party which had governed Macedonia from 2006, that had provoked conflicts with all its neighbours. The results include signing an agreement with Bulgaria, improving relations with Kosovo and Albania, and an intensification of contacts with Greece. The minister of foreign affairs, Nikola Dimitrov, went on his first trip to Athens. Bilateral negotiations under the auspices of the UN have also been resumed after a four-year break.
- The government in Skopje is determined to resolve the dispute with Greece as soon as possible, ideally by the end of April this year. The government wants to capitalise on support for the compromise from a section of the public disillusioned with the nationalist rhetoric of VMRO-DPMNE which resulted in Macedonia becoming isolation on the international scene. A quick compromise would open the way for Macedonia to the launch of accession negotiations and the EU summit in June and to receive an invitation to NATO in July. The presentation of tangible benefits offered by the compromise will make it easier for the government to convince the public to accept the change of the state's name. The Macedonian government finds it helpful that the opposition is weak, plunged in internal conflicts and disgraced by accusations of corruption. This has made

it difficult for the opposition to mobilise the public against the compromise with Athens.

- The situation in Greece and the international situation are not contributing to the compromise. Even though the left-wing prime minister Tsipras wants it, his coalition partners, the opposition and a significant section of the public are not so eager to compromise. In January, thousands of people took to the streets in Thessaloniki in protest against the negotiations. There are no actors in the international arena backing the compromise. The Russian minister of foreign affairs, Sergey Lavrov, has stated that Greece should not make any concessions to Skopje. The Macedonian issue does not seem to be of particular importance to the USA or large EU member states, even though the compromise is in the EU's interest. Macedonia is the only Balkan country whose government is really implementing reforms and closing disputed issues in bilateral relations. The success of the government and the launch of negotiations might be used as an example to other countries aspiring to EU membership and show that the EU still has the power of influence in the region.