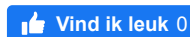




Balkan feud keeps Macedonia out of EU, NATO



By [Jordan Gass-Pooré](#) - Spring 2015 Feb 05, 2015



Click on photo to enlarge or download: Fatmir Besimi, Macedonia's deputy prime minister for European affairs, lays out his plan Tuesday for Macedonia to become the 29th European Union member state at the Washington campus of Johns Hopkins University. The effort has drawn opposition from other EU member states. SHFWire photo by Jordan Gass-Pooré

WASHINGTON – The feud between two southern European countries is as gripping and complex as any “Game of Thrones” episode. It weaves thousands of years of history, geopolitics and a long-dead warrior.

Greece refuses to recognize its neighbor's name, the Republic of Macedonia.

They've been duking it out for more than two decades, despite interventions by the U.S., the United Nations and European powers.

In November 2004, the U.S. [recognized](#) Macedonia's constitutional name and supported the country's efforts to join NATO and the European Union, much to Greece's chagrin.

And now, political and popular support for Macedonia's future in the EU is waning among Macedonians, [Fatmir Besimi](#), Macedonia's deputy prime minister for European affairs, said Tuesday at a small gathering at Johns Hopkins University.

Besimi laid out his plans to make Macedonia, a country bordered by Greece and Bulgaria, the 29th [EU](#) member state.

To do this, the international community needs to be more involved, Besimi said.

But it won't be easy.

The country has been an official [EU](#) candidate since 2005 but has failed to become a member because of a lack of consensus among EU member states, specifically Greece.

Greece has vetoed Macedonia's EU and NATO bids for various reasons over the years.

There's the name issue. Greece wants Macedonia to use a qualifier to indicate the country's origins because Greece has a province with that name. Greece refuses to call Macedonia anything but the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

Macedonia declared independence from Yugoslavia in 1991.

[Matthew Nimetz](#), an American U.N. representative for the naming dispute between Greece and Macedonia, proposed the Republic of Northern Macedonia.



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But Macedonia refuses to change its name. Officials don't understand why Greece sees its name as a threat.

Greece and Bulgaria's stance on Macedonia is that the country and its ethnic identity don't exist, Mario Hristovski, president of [Ohio State University's Macedonian-American student organization](#), said. Macedonian, one of Macedonia's two official languages, isn't recognized by Greece and Bulgaria, except as a dialect of Greek or Bulgarian, Hristovski said.

The renaming of Macedonia's airport added salt to the wound.

Skopje Airport was renamed [Skopje Alexander the Great Airport](#) in 2007 after the warrior whom both countries claim.

“Compromise today is an investment for the future,” Besimi said.

[Amnesty International](#) reported that little progress has been made in solving Macedonia’s human rights issues since the country opened its borders to Kosovar Albanian refugees from nearby Kosovo during the 2001 Kosovo War. Incidents of Kosovar Albanian discrimination have been reported in Macedonia.



Click on photo to enlarge or download: Mario Hristovski, right, president of Ohio State University’s Macedonian-American student organization, holds a sign that reads “Macedonia” as other members of the group hold the country’s flag. Photo courtesy of Mario Hristovski

Hristovski said organizations have also documented human rights abuses in [Greece](#) and [Bulgaria](#) against their Macedonian minorities.

“They’re denied their existence as Macedonians, so to curtail all of these allegations they say that there’s no such thing as Macedonians, there’s no such thing as the Macedonian language,” said Hristovski, who moved at age 6, from Bitola, Macedonia, to the U.S.

Inter-ethnic relationships remain strained in Macedonia because of a delay in the country’s membership to the EU, Besimi said.

Many ethnic Albanians in Macedonia equate the EU membership delay to a human rights stalemate, he said.

The EU and U.S. helped Macedonia create the [Ohrid Framework Agreement](#), a peace agreement designed to end Macedonia's conflict with ethnic Albanian insurgent groups. The agreement led to Albanian being designated as the second official language.

The idea of EU membership gave people hope that the Balkan people – Greece is sometimes included in the list of Balkan countries – had learned from those conflicts and wars that occurred in the 1990s in the region, Besimi said.

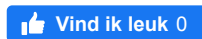
There's a good chance that Macedonia will not be reconsidered for EU membership until 2020, if ever. [NATO](#) may consider Macedonia for membership later this year, something Greece opposes.

Reach reporter Jordan Gass-Pooré at jordan.gass-pooré@scripps.com or 202-408-1490. SHFWire stories are free to any news organization that gives the reporter a byline and credits the SHFWire. Like the Scripps Howard Foundation Wire interns on [Facebook](#) and follow us on [Twitter](#).



About Jordan Gass-Pooré - Spring 2015

Jordan Gass-Pooré is a Spring 2015 reporter for the SHFWire from Texas State University.



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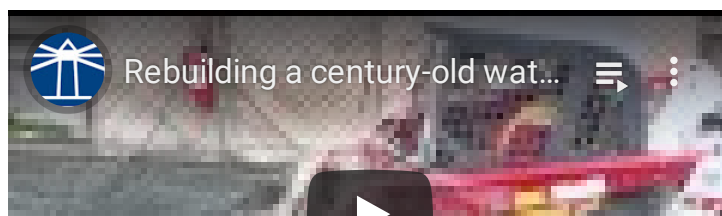


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