

ATHENS NEWS



No strategy emerges on Macedonia issue



Yasser Arafat gives the victory sign in Tripoli, Lebanon, in 1983. Arafat died on November 11 at the age of 75, leaving the Palestinians without a strong leader for the first time in four decades and arousing fears of a chaotic power struggle that could lead to fighting in the streets

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THE MACEDONIA issue was rekindled by US recognition of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) under its chosen name, Macedonia. The recognition came on November 4, days in advance of a referendum that could have recalled minority rights and renewed civil war in FYROM.

The US says it wanted to reinforce the country's unity, but has raised the ire of Greeks, a majority of whom are still against allowing FYROM to name itself anything even containing the M-word. A poll taken by Opinion and broadcast by Mega channel last week showed that 56 percent of Greeks are not ready to compromise by allowing Skopje to use the name of Greece's northern province.

Happily, though, only 30 percent were keen on mass demonstrations, like those organised by the church in early 1992, so a return to the nationalist hysteria that have already damaged Greece's image is unlikely.

Yet no one is sure what the new national strategy for a solution will be. Pasok leader George Papandreou says he has heard no proposals from Costas Karamanlis. Foreign Minister Petros Molyviatis says Greece will "intensify" efforts for a solution at the UN; but those efforts were moribund, and Skopje has repeatedly turned Greece down flat on every proposal.

The government may try to bury the issue, feeling that no news is good news; or it may make a show of fighting for a solution; but with Russia, China and the US among 70 countries recognising FYROM as Macedonia, Greece's hopes are dwindling.

A new strategy fails to emerge

The US decision to recognise Greece's northern neighbour as the Republic of Macedonia has led to recriminations and calls for a national consensus on reaching an agreement with Skopje

By George Gilson

PRIME Minister Costas Karamanlis suggested he may veto the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia's applications to enter the EU and Nato if a mutually acceptable solution is not found to that country's name.

He said raised the issue with European leaders at a Brussels summit on November 4-5, after the United States announced it was recognising the republic under its constitutional name, the Republic of Macedonia.

Foreign Minister Petros Molyviatis told the parliamentary committee on foreign affairs on November 10 that Greece was not to blame for the deadlock over a mutually acceptable name. "The truth is that the other side bears a large measure of responsibility for the prolongation of this impasse. FYROM has for years appeared negative in efforts to find a mutually acceptable solution to the name issue. This was the situation in talks under the UN Secretary-General in New York," Molyviatis said, noting that he told parliament he agreed with his FYROM counterpart to intensify efforts toward a solution in talks with FYROM at the UN.

"We have made it clear that we will not agree to allow Skopje to continue and complete its path toward Europe without reaching a solution on the name issue in the interim," Molyviatis said.

Karamanlis says he wants a national consensus, but it remains unclear what sort of consensus might be reached. In the early 1990s, Greek parties ruled out accepting any name that included the term Macedonia. Today, the Left Coalition is the first party willing to say openly that a composite name that includes the word Macedonia would be acceptable.

But the effectiveness of such a Greek compromise remains doubtful, as FYROM has long been reluctant to accept the composite name. Skopje has suggested it can exist for Greek consumption only, a position Athens rejects.

Political recriminations

The Bush administration's decision, taken one day after the US



EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana (L) at a press conference with FYROM President Branko Crvenkovski in Skopje on November 9

elections, led to fierce recriminations between the government and main opposition Pasok and produced a chorus of criticism of US policy from all Greek political parties.

"The recent decision of the government of the United States is not only condemnable, it is a unilateral decision that is wrong and unacceptable, and we must handle this development jointly," Papandreou, who has enjoyed close ties with Washington, told parliament on November 8.

Yet Athens is underlining that it will not consider economic reprisals against Skopje. Greek investments of about \$700m are estimated to account for about 30 percent of the FYROM economy. Major investments cover the oil, banking, telecommunications, tobacco and food industries.

Can the EU do anything?

The current Dutch EU presidency has said that "for now" the Union is determined to keep using the name FYROM, a position confirmed by the European Commission.

But EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana reportedly did not raise the issue in his meetings with FYROM government officials on a visit there November 9. And Solana used the name Macedonia on his trip. "Some people call it Macedonia, and most people here call it Macedonia," Solana told journalists, when asked to state what country he was visiting.

Papandreou and his party have reserved the bulk of their ire for Karamanlis, accusing the government of having been "caught sleeping" and unable to avert the US diplomatic move. Claiming that under Pasok Americans and Europeans always

Pasok of having let the FYROM name dispute fester for years, as 69 countries recognised FYROM by its constitutional name, "Republic of Macedonia" on the socialists' watch.

US contacts

US Secretary of State Colin Powell, in a telephone conversation with Molyviatis, assured his Greek counterpart that recognition was not intended as a blow against Greece. The State Department insists that the move was designed to defeat a nationalist referendum that would have blocked a deal to grant increased autonomy to the Albanian minority in FYROM. The so-called Ohrid Accord was designed to put an end to fighting between separatist Albanian guerrillas and FYROM government forces in June 2001.

More recently, Skopje has managed to garner the political favour of Washington by sending troops to Iraq and signing an agreement exempting US forces from prosecution by the International Criminal Court.

On November 1, just three days before the US recognition, Molyviatis wrote to Powell to complain about a

bilateral agreement with Skopje signed by US Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld on October 11, in which the term "Government of Macedonia" was used instead of FYROM.

Molyviatis argued that use of any name but FYROM, "is likely to affect the outcome of the [UN] talks and thus hamper an appropriate settlement."

One year earlier, Powell received a similar complaint from then foreign minister George Papandreou, after Skopje signed an agreement with Washington not to surrender Americans to the International Criminal Court. Papandreou noted that FYROM is the name recognised by the UN, the EU and other international organisations and asserted Greece's willingness to reach a "mutually acceptable solution". "We truly regret to find our interlocutors not reciprocating," he wrote.

With Washington fully aware of Greece's position on the issue, it is unclear what more, if anything, Athens might have done to avert American recognition. But Athens was especially irked that Washington did not even inform Greece of its impending move, leading to charges of a US "backstabbing".