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The use of the Macedonian name dispute on the candidates' websites in Northern Greece's regional and municipal elections of 2019

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ABSTRACT

This research paper employed Ideological Discourse Analysis (IDA) to study the use of the Macedonian Name Dispute (MND) on the websites of the eight most prominent candidates of the regional and municipal elections of 2019 in Thessaloniki and Central Macedonia. MND is one of the oldest territorial name disputes in the world, as it is connected to the Macedonian Question dating back to the end of the 19th century. For almost 30 years, the MND has been used in Greece's political competition, and more recently in 2018 and 2019 due to the ratification of the Prespes (or Prespa) Agreement between Greece and the country now-named North Macedonia. This study revealed that politicians employed the MND as a communication tool to provoke powerful emotions linked with the Greek identity. After all, MND, like other territorial name disputes (e.g., South China Sea, Persian/Arabian Gulf, Kuril Islands/Northern Territories, Nagorno-Karabakh/Artsakh, Western Sahara), seems to preserve a dominant discourse in which the emotional factor dictates the truth and goes against those who oppose this existing reality.


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Introduction

The names of places or territories are considered crucial in constructing the general idea of a nation-state as they can refer to various meanings in the minds and hearts of the citizens. There are currently many territorial name disputes, which have been active for decades, or even hundreds of years.

One example of such a dispute is between RASD (Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic), led by the Polisario Front, and the Kingdom of Morocco for Western Sahara. For the latter, the disputed territory comes under the name of

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'Southern Provinces', but for the Polisario Forces, it is called 'Free Zone' or 'Liberated Territories/Zone'. This conflict has surpassed four decades without any actual solution between the two fighting agents despite the ceasefire agreement that was accepted in 1991 along with a Settlement Plan by the United Nations (UN) (Ojeda-Garcia et al., 2017; Ottaway, 2013).

A more thorough look at this conflict demonstrates that there is a plethora of reasons for keeping this complicated situation alive. For some, there are not even actual historical claims for Western Sahara from both sides (Thoren, 2015).

However, the ageing of this territorial dispute has resulted in providing a different use of the naming problem. Instead of becoming a part of the overall dispute, it has become a living entity of a vague part of national identity, making the 'Southern Provinces' communication process a crucial political tool (Dunbar, 2000).

The case mentioned above is one of the many territories being called by different names for realizing political goals. Other cases around the globe, to name a few, are the ones between Brazil and Bolivia for an island named 'Isla Suárez' by the first and 'Ilha de Guajará-Mirim' by the latter (Murphy, 2017). In addition, the islands between Russia and Japan are the so-called 'Kuril Islands' or 'Northern Territories' according to Russian and Japanese lenses, respectively (Richardson, 2016). Also, the disputes in the South China Sea, in which the various countries name the sea based on their narratives (Kang, n.d.), or the controversy amongst the Arab Nations and Iran regarding the name of the Gulf (Gordon, 1971).

The Macedonian Name Dispute (MND) is a similar case in which it is highly debatable if there are actual territorial claims. MND has been used in the Greek political competition for several years, giving important power to political parties opposing an agreement with North Macedonia (Ellinas, 2010). MND has been on the European political scene for over a century (Heraclides, 2019).

Around the last 30 years, the MND has developed between North Macedonia and Greece. It has to do mainly with the disagreement from Greece in allowing its neighbouring country, which used to be called FYROM (Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), to use a name that would include the word Macedonia. The MND is so powerful in the Greek discourse that it has provoked probably the largest demonstrations in the country's history, and even extreme actions of censorship, such as the criminalization of those individuals that were in favour of giving the name Macedonia to the neighbouring country (Heraclides, 2019; Petsini & Christopoulos, 2016).

Besides, it has led to great electoral empowerment of political parties and became one of the most influential issues for the Greek municipal and regional elections of 2019 due to the ratification of the Prespes Agreement

at the beginning of 2019. As a result, the MND contributed to the electoral loss of SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left), the party that supported and ratified the so-called Prespes Agreement (signed on the 17th of June, 2018). On the 7th of July 2019, the party of New Democracy (ND) won the elections and formed the new Greek government.

Prespes Agreement eventually gave the name Macedonia to FYROM, which was renamed 'North Macedonia' and, thus, led almost to the fall of the Greek government due to the break-up of the governmental coalition. However, the prominent right-wing opposition party, ND, despite claiming that it would alter the agreement and using that argument throughout the elections of 2019, after winning all the elections, formed a government that not only backed up the Prespes Agreement but also seemed to praise it (Karyotakis, 2022).

Considering the under-researched topic of how different territorial names are used to refer to the same geographical region from the conflicting sides in political competition, the current paper provides valuable empirical insights into these disputes through the study of the MND. Therefore, it examines how and why the nine websites of the most prominent candidates for the regional and municipal elections 2019 in the city of Thessaloniki (the second most populated city in Greece) and the region of Central Macedonia used the MND in the electoral campaign.

Through the method of IDA, it is shown that the winners of the elections used the MND to appeal to the public by the narrative of non-agreeing to a possible solution as a core message for their electoral campaign. That particular dominant narrative in Greek politics highlighted the Macedonian identity as a part of the Greek cultural and historical heritage through dramatization and distancing methods.

To show the exploitation of the MND as a political tool and its power, the paper first reviews the MND's use throughout the years in Greece's electoral power and its close connection with the right-wing and far-right ideology. After these two sections, the paper's study is presented, as well as its results and conclusions.

The MND as a populist tool for parties in Greece

The ongoing dispute over the name Macedonia started on the 17th of November 1991, when the country with the constitutional name of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) announced its independence from Yugoslavia. For the Greeks, the main obstacle to recognizing the new republic was its constitution's Article 49, which implied territorial claims against Greece. The European Union supported Greece's objections and clarified that for the FYROM to be recognized internationally, it should show that it had no territorial claims against Greece (Roudometof, 1996).

In the first month of 1992, the parliament of the new republic of FYROM declared through two constitutional amendments that it had no territorial claims on neighbouring countries' land, that it would not interfere in the domestic politics of the neighbouring countries, and that it would not change its borders without following international rules. After making these amendments, the republic won European Union's recognition. Greece, however, remained dissatisfied, as it believed that the use of the name Macedonia by FYROM undermined Greece's historical and cultural heritage (Roudometof, 1996).

The name Macedonia has an emotional hold on most Greeks, making the dispute an opportunity for political parties to appeal to the public and gain its support. In probably the most massive protest in the country's history, around a million Greeks demonstrated for not giving the name Macedonia to FYROM on the 14th of February 1992, in Thessaloniki,¹ the country's second-largest city of Greece and the most prominent city of the Land of Macedonia (Heraclides, 2019).

Several other protests occurred in the 1990s in cities with a Greek diaspora presence, such as Melbourne, Australia. Almost all the media and political parties in the country were promoting the same narrative (Koukoumakas, 2018). A coalition government later negotiated an agreement with FYROM, but in the 1990s, this 'Macedonia is Greek' sentiment was strong even on the left. For example, *Avgi*, the official newspaper of Synaspismos, the main party on the left, supported the 1992 demonstrations on its front pages and articles (Heraclides, 2019).²

Politicians differed in the aggressiveness of their stances, and this caused a major rift within the then-Greek government formed by New Democracy (ND). The then Foreign Minister, Antonis Samaras, took a strong stand, arguing that Greece could not accept a neighbour with a name that included the word 'Macedonia'. According to Serwer (2019, p. 57): 'Samaras went so far as to say that he wanted to see the dissolution of Macedonia and the formation of a Greater Albania, rather than accept a solution that included "Macedonia".' Samaras led a breakaway faction and created a new political party, Political Spring. This led to ND's loss of its majority in parliament and the fall of the Mitsotakis government in 1993 (Roudometof, 1996).

During the same period, the MND empowered the far-right party of Golden Dawn (GD). It propelled the party to participate in these massive demonstrations and attract the interest of the Greeks. GD, during that period, was even able to influence school students with their extreme nationalistic viewpoints regarding the MND, provoking influential grassroots mobilization for the protection of the Greekness of Macedonia (Papadimitriou, 2014; Sakellariou, 2015). The non-acceptance of the name Macedonia for the neighbouring country was always a crucial electoral tool for GD (Ellinas, 2010).³

Similarly, Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK), although it was considered a left-wing party, held a strong stance against FYROM by even imposing a strict embargo, which in 1994 had a major impact on FYROM's economy, resulting in more than 80 per cent decline in the country's export and an around 40 per cent of reduction in food supplies (Heraclides, 2019). The stance of PASOK regarding the MND, despite its ideological difference from ND, highlights the issue of shaping the national Greek identity.

Greece's political system has been built around intense political polarization that could even provoke critical societal divisions, such as the period of National Schism (1915–1922), a series of events centred on the conflict between Eleftherios Venizelos, then Greek prime Minister, and King Constantine I for letting the country entering in World War I (WWI). Venizelos and his supporters wanted to enter WWI as 'it became increasingly apparent that Greek sovereignty itself was also at stake, primarily over the New Lands (i.e., the territorial gains of the Balkan Wars) and above all Macedonia' (Mavrogordatos, 1983, p. 27). The Schism became so prominent that Greece was split into two different regions, with Venizelos establishing the Provisional Government with Thessaloniki as the capital in 1916 and entering the war alongside the Entente Powers (Mavrogordatos, 1983).

However, Greece is considered to have a low nationhood cleavage, as both main parties in the country agreed on similar principles for the Greek identity. The two most influential political traditions in Greek politics represented by PASOK (centre-left and left-wing ideology) and New Democracy (centre-right and right-wing ideology) were supporting a similar Greek identity based on speaking the same language (Greek) and having the same religion (Christian Orthodox) (Aktürk & Lika, 2022). These ideas shaped the dominant narrative about the MND, which argued that Macedonia could only be Greek. That idea was used as a tool and sometimes as an existential threat for mobilizing the citizens (Karyotakis, 2022; Nimetz, 2020).

SYRIZA, though, comes from a radical left ideology that is different from the viewpoints' of PASOK and ND. As Aktürk and Lika (2022) have pointed out, the left and communist ideology perceives differently the identity related to Macedonia. As SYRIZA had people that accepted communist ideas and elements of the communist ideology (Douzinas, 2017), it is not a surprise that SYRIZA's politicians shared similar ideas of supporting a solution such as the Prespes Agreement.

At this point, it should be mentioned that for the ratification of the Prespes Agreement in the Greek parliament, SYRIZA relied on support from ideological progressive parliamentarians as its ally in the coalition government, the party Independent Greeks (right-wing ideology), broke away due to the disagreement with the Prespes Agreement (Stronski & Himes, 2019). Also, in North Macedonia, the Prespes Agreement was realized by the centre-left party of the Social Democratic Union, which was accused by right-wing

political figures that ‘the Social Democrats erased the history of these people. They claimed that history until 1945 belonged only to the Greeks’ (Aktürk & Lika, 2022, p. 16).

Nevertheless, the number of political parties and personalities using the MND to pursue their own interests is vast, and it is not possible to specify them all. Instead, the following section deals with the extreme-right positions of groups such as GD. It will be argued that the normalization of right-wing nationalist discourse is a key reason why the Prespes Agreement has been unable to resolve the MND.

The right-wing, far-right ideology, and the MND

After the collapse of the Greek dictatorship in 1974, there was a process of democratization for Greece, in which the main right-wing political party of the country, ND, tried to absorb the political elites who were supporting extreme right-wing views. The most famous case was probably the inclusion of several members of the National Alignment (an ultraconservative party in favour of monarchy) in ND for the 1981 national elections (Georgiadou, 2013).

The start of the 21st century led ND to a significant alteration of its primary political strategy. Instead of embracing extreme views that risked alienating many Greeks, it decided to target specific topics that would resonate across both extreme right and centre-right. It would then emphasize these themes in its communication strategy and political agenda (Georgiadou, 2013).

One of those topics was the MND. This strategy was probably related to political competition. The parties that supported the nationalistic narrative of not compromising with North Macedonia to resolve the name dispute were gaining influential electoral power. In 2007, before the national elections, the then government of ND decided to block the EU admission of the country FYROM if the name ‘Macedonia’ was used. It was believed that this hard stance against North Macedonia would be necessary to outflank the ethno-populist right or far-right party of LAOS (People’s Orthodox Alarm) (Ellinas, 2010; Georgiadou, 2013). Nevertheless, in the national elections of 2007, LAOS succeeded in winning seats in the Greek parliament for the first time after its creation in 2000. LAOS kept gaining electoral power, which peaked in 2011 when it participated in the government of Lucas Papademos until 2012 (Ellinas, 2013; Georgiadou, 2013).

LAOS was founded in 2000 by a former MP of ND, Georgios Karatzaferis. LAOS, like Political Spring, was holding a strong stance on the MND. It opposed any solution that included the name Macedonia. LAOS was putting great emphasis on the importance of the MND in order to gain electoral power (Ellinas, 2012; Mylonas, 2019). In 2010, several members of LAOS (Georgiadis, Velopoulos, Vorides, Plevris, etc.) left the party and moved to ND. Some of them became prominent members of the government formed

by ND and its leader, Antonis Samaras, who had returned to the party (Vasilopoulou & Halikiopoulou, 2013). For example, Georgiadis served as the Minister of Health in Samaras' government, and under the current leader of ND, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, he became Vice President of the party (Delphiforum.gr, 2017).

Another party that was, in a way, reborn through the MND was one of the most extreme far-right parties in Europe, the Golden Dawn (GD). The party was founded in 1983 under the name of 'People's Association – Golden Dawn', and it was a strong supporter of popular nationalism. Other prominent figures of far-right ideology, like Makis Vorides, also tried to exploit the nationalistic momentum by creating new political parties that were not associated with the Greek dictatorship or junta. Vorides and other members of the far-right National Party created the Hellenic Front (HF) in 1994. Vorides, the leader of HF, and Nikos Michaloliakos, the leader of GD, were influential members of the National Political Union, which was formed in 1984 by the imprisoned colonel and leader of the Greek junta from 1967–74 (Ellinas, 2013).

The efforts of the HF to gain more power through the MND proved unsuccessful because of the controversy that erupted within New Democracy and the creation of the party named Political Spring by Antonis Samaras (Ellinas, 2013). Samaras (Greek Prime Minister from 2012–15) is still one of the most impactful political figures in Greece, as he remains a member of ND. Samaras was accused of causing the MND at the beginning of the 90s since a document he signed as the then Foreign Minister of Greece is supposedly the first by the Greek state conceding the term Macedonia to the neighbouring country. However, Samaras refuses to be defined by this narrative, arguing that the word Macedonia cannot be in the name of Greece's neighbouring country. Samaras' stance and the denial of accepting the name Macedonia by the signed document provoked the historical conflict in the ND that led to the collapse of the government in 1993 (Baskakis & Psarras, 2018).

The government's fall, though, revealed new information, such as the possible manipulation of the media by Samaras to communicate his opinion about not accepting any form of a name that would include the word Macedonia (Baskakis & Psarras, 2018; lospress.gr, 2009). The then leader of ND and prime minister of Greece, Konstantinos Mitsotakis, revealed that Samaras was trying to influence the public discourse by using the secret funds of the Greek Foreign Ministry. Mitsotakis argued that there was a significant rise in secret funds during Samaras' service as a Foreign Minister. Large sums of money were given to news outlets, media companies, publishers, and journalists. For Mitsotakis, the main goal of Samaras was the promotion of his political agenda by using the dispute (Baskakis & Psarras, 2018; lospress.gr, 2009).

The absorption of LAOS party members (from 2012 and forth) into prominent positions in ND provided Samaras with more people who seemed to share common beliefs about the MND. Therefore, ND, under his leadership, started communicating the harsh nationalistic viewpoints of LAOS (Baskakis & Psarras, 2018; Kostopoulos & Psarras, 2018). In addition, Samaras had to please many traditional members within ND, as a different approach to the Macedonian controversy could risk the split of the party. The perspectives of ND were going back and forth regarding the MND, although there was always a sturdy branch of the party that adopted and communicated the narrative about the Greekness of Macedonia (Baskakis & Psarras, 2018; Kostopoulos & Psarras, 2018).

That is one of the main reasons why ND could never actually provide a real solution to the problem. Besides, there were many occasions when the party faced a split due to the MND. For the anti-solution bloc, there can be no word or term related to Macedonia in the name of the neighbouring country. By agreeing to recognize the name, the language, the nation, or the nationality of Macedonian origins, there would be a loss of one of the significant components of the Greek identity (Baskakis & Psarras, 2018; Kostopoulos & Psarras, 2018).

During the electoral period of 2019, the loss of Macedonian identity was communicated with the slogan of 'The Clearance Sale of Macedonia' or 'Sell – out' ('Ξεπούλημα της Μακεδονίας') as 'there is only one Macedonia, it is, was and always will be Greek' (Karyotakis, 2022; Kitsantonis, 2018; Skoulariki, 2021). Therefore, the loss of the monopoly in the Macedonian identity was seen as amounting to an existential threat to Greece (Karyotakis, 2022).

The decline and banning of Golden Dawn did not spell an end to extreme MND positions. In the 2019 national elections, a large proportion of the voters from Golden Dawn supported the new political party, Greek Solution (Elliniki Lusi), a far-right nationalist party founded on 28 June 2016 by a journalist named Kyriakos Velopoulos. Velopoulos was a former Member of the Greek Parliament (MP) with LAOS. He became known for selling Jesus Christ's authentic handwritten letters on television (Efstathiou, 2019; Ekathimerini.com, 2019). Greek Solution elected one member of the parliament in the European Elections of 2019 and passed the threshold of 3 per cent of the electoral votes easily in the national elections in order to get into the Greek parliament.

According to the official website of Greek Solution, the party

seeks to establish stronger relations with Russia, it is strongly opposed to the use of the word 'Macedonia' in the name of the neighboring Republic of North Macedonia, and seeks to revive Greece's heavy industry and reorient the educational system with an emphasis on nationalism and Orthodoxy. (Ekathimerini.com, 2019)

Velopoulos' pro-Russian stance reveals the fact that the MND always had an important international aspect, as global powers intervened in the negotiations, such as the European Union, the United States, and Russia. For example, the Prespes Agreement was perceived as a step towards more peaceful relationships in the Balkan Peninsula, opening the doors simultaneously for North Macedonia to join the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Consequently, the interference of Russia in North Macedonia would be minimized (Nimetz, 2020).

Moreover, Greece seemed to be the only country that was blocking access to the European Union for North Macedonia (Tziampiris, 2012), which seemed to be a tool in the political competition. In addition, it is worth mentioning that SYRIZA's coalition party in its government, Independent Greeks (right-wing), seemed to have a strong pro-Russian stance (Stronski & Himes, 2019). The coalition government formed by SYRIZA and Independent Greeks at the beginning of its electoral mandate in 2015 had strong relationships with Russia, but they reached an unprecedented low point with the Prespes Agreement, as Russia was accused of meddling in Greece's internal affairs in July 2018 and, thus, two Russian diplomats were expelled from Greece because of espionage (Chryssogelos, 2021).

The main arguments and narratives against the solution in the MND have remained almost the same throughout the 27 years of the dispute. The MND has been used for many years for empowering political parties, far-right groups, and the Greek Orthodox Church, and spreading hate against those that were supporting a possible solution to the name dispute (Ellinas, 2010; Mavromatidis, 2010). Also, Nimetz (2020, p. 209) underlined that one of the problems in solving the MND was that the countries' governments were 'being careful not to stoke the fires of nationalist rhetoric, especially during election periods'. In addition, according to a senior Greek diplomat, 'no Greek Government would make an agreement that was not supported by the leading opposition party, or it would lose the next election' (Nimetz, 2020, p. 210). The senior diplomat's viewpoint was proved correct, as SYRIZA suffered significant losses in the European, local, and national elections that took place in 2019.

Language, nationality, and the symbolic power of a name offer meanings, which create a nationalistic dogmatized feeling of belonging in a distinct group. Nationalism tries to make distinct the differences between the identities and to highlight the uniqueness of one group against the other. People that do not have that common heritage and shared values or characteristics cannot be a member of the same group, as they do not share the same uniqueness (Luqiu, 2018).

This constructed distinction and uniqueness can become an opportunity for communicating hate and attacking, even with sticks and stones, the group that does not share these characteristics. To put it differently, the name

Macedonia offers a powerful symbolic tool, including various abstract referents that can impose a different reality. Consequently, the MND offers politicians ways of influencing the public and realizing their political ambitions.

This historical narrative of the events associated with the MND and the Prespes Agreement shows that the name dispute is not primarily related to the bilateral relations between Greece and North Macedonia. It arises from the domestic politics of Greece. It has created and sustained a dispute that is not focused on control of a physical territory but around the symbols and the symbolic narratives linked with the imagined geography of the Land of Macedonia. Consequently, the next sections of the paper are the study's data and the methods for the use of the MND on the most prominent candidates' websites in the regional and municipal elections of 2019 in Thessaloniki.

Data and methods

The study focused on the nine websites of the most prominent candidates for the regional and municipal elections 2019 in the city of Thessaloniki and the region of Central Macedonia (Table 1). The first round of the elections occurred on 26 May and the second on 2 June 2019.

Table 1. The candidates' information and results for the regional and municipal elections 2019 in the city of Thessaloniki and the region of Central Macedonia.

Head of electoral combination (electoral list)	Name of the electoral combination (electoral list)	Party Support	Percent of Votes	Number of Websites
Running for Governor of Central Macedonia				
Apostolos-Ioannis Tzitzikostas	Apostolos Tzitzikostas Solidarity Empowering Macedonia	New Democracy	62.03 per cent	1
Christos Giannoulis	Look Ahead	SYRIZA	11.47 per cent	1
Running for Mayor of Thessaloniki				
Nikos Tachiaos	Thessaloniki-Tachiaos-Responsible	New Democracy	22.48 per cent (33.37 per cent)	1
Konstantinos Zervas	Yes To Thessaloniki	New Democracy, But No Official Support	14.98 per cent (66.63 per cent)	2
Georgios Orfanos	Thessaloniki Is The Future	New Democracy, But No Official Support	14.47 per cent	1
Aikaterini Notopoulou	Thessaloniki Together	SYRIZA	13.43 per cent	1
Spyridon Vougias	Colourful Thessaloniki – Spyros Vougias	KINAL	7.02 per cent	1
Panagiotis Psomiadis	Citizens' Power Panagiotis Psomiadis For Mayor	Independent Candidate	5.47 per cent	1

Note. The data comes from the Greek Ministry of Interior. The percent of the votes in the parenthesis for Zervas and Tachiaos is the result of the elections. They had to compete against each other for a second week to be elected mayor according to the regulation of the Greek state.

For the analysis of the use of the MND on the websites, ideological discourse analysis (IDA) was employed. IDA as a form of critical discourse analysis (CDA) could reveal the following research question:

(RQ1): How and why the most prominent candidates in the municipal and regional elections of 2019 in Thessaloniki, the second most populated city in Greece, employed MND on their electoral websites?

IDA explores communication as a process that can affect the power relations amongst individuals and support or promote particular representations associated with ideology and the control of knowledge (Van Dijk, 1993, 2013). 'Ideological knowledge control . . . may involve attributing special credibility to specific truth instances, such as God, Science, the Party or the Union' (Van Dijk, 1998, p. 117). The study of the ideological discourse, which is mainly how ideologies and their elements are spread and reproduced, is perceived as a significant topic of CDA (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000).

Ideological knowledge and its constructions refer to a common belief system that individuals seem to accept without challenging it. In other words, in the current paper, ideologies refer to 'the social beliefs that relieved the common knowledge or social representations shared by a particular group' (Karyotakis, 2023, p. 7). Van Dijk (2009) has highlighted that ideological discourses commonly focus on polarized ideas to empower specific beliefs or knowledge and create a contentious environment between different groups. As a result, it is common for politicians to use the existing ideological knowledge to win electoral power by promoting stereotypical representations (Van Dijk, 2009).

Despite IDA not having been used before as an assessment tool for name disputes, it has been used in studies for investigating self-identity, activity, goal, norm, values, position, and relations descriptions (I. Chiluya & Chiluya, 2020; Karyotakis, 2021). Thus, researchers can examine how identity issues are described, constructed, and disseminated. IDA can shed light on cases that the conflicting sides could use, for example, exaggerations to empower the idea of an ingroup (we) against an outgroup (others). These exaggerations could empower stereotypical representations and dominant narratives that support the idea of victimhood or the right to be heard for the ingroup and the outgroup (I. M. Chiluya & I. Chiluya, 2020; Karyotakis, 2021). As Fairclough has pointed out, 'discourse is ideological in so far as it contributes to sustaining particular relations of power and domination' (Fairclough, 2012, p. 15).

These stereotypical representations and the promotion of a particular knowledge can be succeeded in various ways. Therefore, the manuscript focuses on these ideological constructions that promote polarization through

the idea of ‘us versus them’. ‘Us’ represents the ingroup that the politician belongs to, and ‘them’ is the outgroup.

More specifically, the current study investigates, firstly, the distancing methods, meaning the ways the politicians were referring to the different conflicting sides to show that there is a distance between them and the sides that they do not support. Secondly, the dramatization, which is the exaggeration of facts or information to promote positive and negative viewpoints of the ingroup and the outgroup. Through the dramatization process in polarized and contentious issues, it is common to promote the idea that the ingroup is a victim of the outgroup. The provided exemplars in the study are highlighted in bold throughout the next section’s examples. Also, in the parentheses, there is one of the two categories to which the exemplars belong.

The candidates’ websites were analysed, as they are considered a crucial communication tool for spreading and presenting the core message of candidates’ electoral campaigns. Candidates’ websites can have a crucial impact during electoral campaigns (Owen, 2014; Southern & Lee, 2018). Finally, the language of a website can contain specific expressions and words that focus on disseminating ideological meanings to a certain audience (I. M. Chiluja & I. Chiluja, 2020).

Regarding the limitations, this research paper focused on the websites of the most prominent candidates of the regional and municipal elections of 2019 in Thessaloniki and Central Macedonia to study the use of the MND in domestic politics as a communication tool for gaining electoral power. A study that will include the investigation of other media and social platforms regarding the electoral campaigns of the examined candidates might also provide useful insights concerning the use of the MND as a territorial name dispute in political competition.

Using the dominant discourse of the MND

Running for governor of Central Macedonia: Apostolos Tzitzikostas (ND) & Christos Giannoulis (SYRIZA)

For Apostolos Tzitzikostas, the new governor of Central Macedonia after the 2019 elections, the MND seemed to be one of the most prominent communication tools for his campaign. Tzitzikostas’ homepage had four announcements. Two of them (the second, ‘Macedonia Regional Council Resolution: “Negotiate with Skopje without the term Macedonia”’, and the fourth, ‘The government should not start the negotiations with Skopje from the red lines’) were about the MND and the negotiations with North Macedonia for solving the dispute (see the red square boxes in [Figure 1](#)).

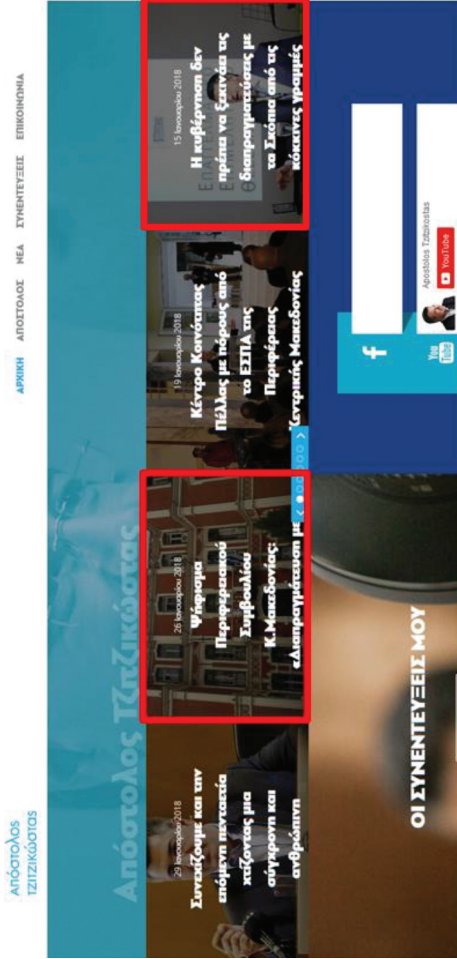


Figure 1. The Home Page of Apostolos Tzitzikostas (tzitzikostas.Gr).

Tzitzikostas seemed to use the hard stance of Samaras' and so forth (Roudometof, 1996), as he argued that

we do not accept (*distancing method*) **the usurpation** (*dramatization*) by the neighboring country of Macedonia's historical and cultural heritage, which is an integral part of Greek history

(Tzitzikostas.gr, 2018). The pronoun 'we' was used to show that Tzitzikostas is siding with the group, which is against the Prespes Agreement. In addition, in order to empower his narrative, Tzitzikostas used the word 'usurpation' to highlight the negative impression of a possible solution that includes the name Macedonia for Greece's neighbouring country.

Tzitzikostas made his ideas more explicit by promoting through his website the support of the dominant narrative of the existential threat towards Greece if there is a solution to the MND:

The government should not see Greece's position at the 2008 Bucharest Summit as a national line **for naming Skopje** (*distancing method*). That was and remained the '**national red line**' The government should not start negotiations on **the red lines** (*dramatization*) but should aim for the best, **not to include the term 'Macedonia'** (*dramatization*) **in the name of Skopje** (*distancing method*). After all, the conditions today are conducive to finding a solution in this direction. In addition, **the government must stop negotiating in secret** (*distancing method*). It has to inform about the strategy with which it is participating in the negotiations and commit that any solution it brings will put an **end to Skopje's redemptive aspirations** (*dramatization*).

In the exemplar, the new governor of Greece's administrative region of Central Macedonia employs a series of methods and dramatizations to underline the differences between the ingroup and the outgroup. More specifically, Greece's neighbouring country after the Prespes Agreement is named North Macedonia, but he referred to it as 'Skopje', which is the capital of North Macedonia. That particular word is employed on purpose to amplify the polarization, as some Greeks tend to refer to North Macedonia as Skopje, which could be perceived as a racist term that tends to promote the superiority of Greek identity and the inferiority of North Macedonia (Karyotakis, 2023). Furthermore, according to Tzitzikostas, the government seemed to support 'Skopje's redemptive aspirations' as it was negotiating in secret.

On the contrary, for Christos Giannoulis, the candidate supported by SYRIZA, the party that implemented the Prespes Agreement, the MND seemed not to be a topic worthy of highlighting (Figure 2).

Nevertheless, through the examination of the website (koitamemprosta.gr), the second and the fourth bullet on the homepage (see Figure 2) describing the vision of the electoral list were indirectly connected with the Prespes Agreement:



Figure 2. The Home Page of Christos Giannoulis' Electoral Combination (koitamemprosta.Gr).

2) A region as a dynamic factor of economic cooperation and development in the Balkans and the wider region. (*distancing method*)

4) A region that, in the face of xenophobia and racism, builds walls of a strong 'identity' (*distancing method*), which is not in danger of contacting the different, but it can also coexist peacefully with it. (*distancing method*)

The messages of mutual understanding, promotion of peace, and growth in the Balkans were some of the main points of the communication campaign led by SYRIZA concerning the MND and showing the party's truth about the Prespes Agreement (Amna.gr, 2019b). Moreover, those narratives fit with one of the main goals of the party for the creation of a coalition consisting of progressive ideological forces that will go against the extreme right policies in Europe (Amna.gr, 2019a). As a result, Giannoulis aimed to show that his group has different beliefs than the other side (outgroup), valuing peaceful coexistence.

Running for mayor of Thessaloniki: Nikos Tachiaos (ND), Konstantinos Zervas & Georgios Orfanos (ND members, but no official party's support)

For the official candidate of New Democracy, Nikos Tachiaos, the MND did not seem to be an essential topic for the electoral campaign as there was no direct or indirect mention on the website (tachiaos.gr). Nevertheless, for Konstantinos Zervas, the winner of the 2019 elections and the new mayor of Thessaloniki, the MND was a crucial issue. On the website of the electoral combination (naistithessaloniki.gr), in the section about his biography, Zervas was promoting his true Macedonian identity by arguing that he is a descendant of the Greek fighter of the Macedonian Struggle, Petros Orologas. Besides, he argued that his origins are from Bitola (Figure 3). For Greeks, Bitola is commonly known as Monastir, and it is associated with the Greek identity and the ancient Kingdom of Alexander the Great and his father:

The consanguinity with the Macedonian fighter, Petros Orologas, from the Monastir (*distancing method*), but also with the national martyr Chrysostomos Smyrnis, his roots from the heroic Souli of Epirus and the martyr Triglia of Asia Minor, **have determined his personality** (*dramatization*) - if anyone knows his origin. He could only **take for granted his position in favor of the Greekness of Macedonia and against the Prespes Agreement** (*distancing method*), but also his viewpoints that **from time to time expresses for our national rights** (*distancing method*) - on the island of Ellis there is a registered name 'Konstantinos Zervas' as his grandfather fled to the United States as an immigrant to escape the Ottoman Turks.

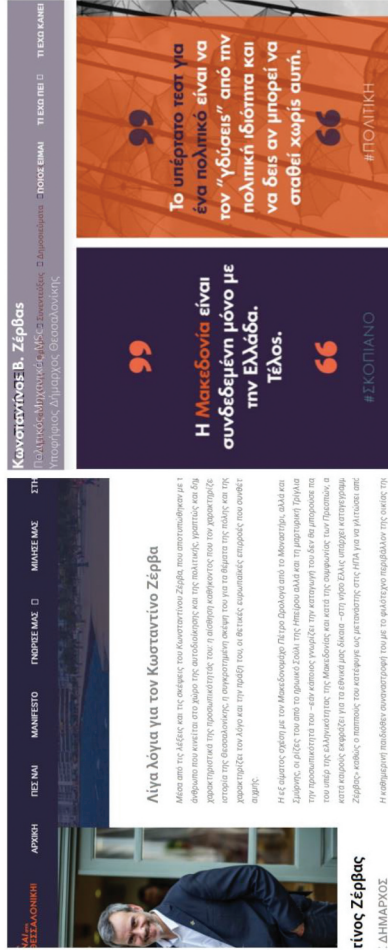


Figure 3. The Two Sections on Zervas' Websites (naistithessaloniki.Gr (left) & kzervas.Gr (right)) where there is the use of the MND.

Zervas' efforts aimed to emotionally affect the voters by emphasizing the historical importance of their ancestors and that he was following their paths. However, it is not clear what is the exact bloodline between him and his ancestors and how they affected his political viewpoints. Zervas' main aims were to make clear the fact that he is in favour of the Greekness of Macedonia and against the Prespes Agreement, as he belongs to the group that fights for the national rights of Greece due to his ancestors that shaped him as a person.

Moreover, on his personal website (kzervas.gr), a banner with a purple background made declarations about the MND that 'Macedonia is only connected with Greece. The end' (Figure 3).

For Orfanos, another candidate strongly connected with ND, the MND did not seem to play such a prominent role on his website (orfanos.gr). Orfanos, like Tachiaos and the other candidates linked with ND, had made clear that he was against the Prespes Agreement and the solution to the MND. However, he adopted extreme arguments to support the narrative of not giving the name Macedonia to the neighbouring country. On the 17th of January 2019, he made an announcement titled 'Macedonia needs you NOW! Do not leave it alone', in which he was calling the citizens to protest against the solution. According to the announcement, the agreement recognizes a 'Macedonian ethnicity', a 'Macedonian language' and gives the name Macedonia to the neighbouring country. Therefore, Greeks cannot accept the Prespes Agreement as:

It is self-evident that **we Greeks love, seek peace, and want to contribute to their consolidation** (*distancing method*). Nevertheless, **this does not mean that we will give in** (*distancing method*) **to what we consider national rights** (*dramatization*). We will not forget **the thousands of years of history, struggles, sacrifices, and hard work that we have often paid with blood** (*dramatization*). **It is obvious that the fragmentation of Greece is being sought** (*dramatization*).

Orfanos used the hard stance in the MND by establishing that he belonged to the ingroup of Greeks that was peaceful and was provoked by North Macedonia and those that promoted the Prespes Agreement. Through dramatization, he tried to appeal to the voters' emotions and prove that Greece is facing an existential threat from the outgroup that promoted the solution to the MND. Greeks have the right to monopolize the name Macedonia, as they have even sacrificed themselves during the 'thousands of years of history' to protect Macedonia.

Running for mayor of Thessaloniki: Katerina Notopoulou (SYRIZA), Spyros Vougias (KINAL) & Panagiotis Psomiadis (independent candidate)

Notopoulou from SYRIZA and Vougias from Movement for Change (KINAL) did not use the MND as a core issue in their electoral campaign on their websites (thessaloniki-mazi.gr & polixromi.gr respectively). There is no direct connection to the agreement or the solution regarding the Macedonian issue. Thessaloniki Together's website argued that Thessaloniki has to be further internationalized and play a more important role in the financial growth of the Balkans. These arguments might be linked with the MND, though it is not clear enough if it is associated with the dispute.

Lastly, Panagiotis Psomiadis, another candidate with strong connections with ND, had been elected MP for several years and governor of Central Macedonia (Malkoutzis, 2011). Psomiadis used the MND as the primary communication tool for winning the elections on his website (panagiotispsomiadis.gr). He was the only candidate that had, as the first goal of his programme, established a committee with experts who would fight against the Prespes Agreement (Figure 4).

The committee's goal would be to denounce and stop the agreement through legal means. Furthermore, Psomiadis made clear that as mayor of Thessaloniki, he was not going to accept the Prespes Agreement (Figure 4):

A. CREATION OF A STRUGGLE FRONT OF EXPERTS AGAINST THE PRESPE AGREEMENT (*dramatization*)

1. **The fight** against the 'Prespes Agreement' **will become part of our daily lives** (*dramatization*). At the initiative of the municipal authority, a '**Struggle Front**' **will be set up by experts – volunteers, who will legally attempt to terminate the agreement in all international forums** (*dramatization*). 2. Panagiotis Psomiadis, mayor of Macedonia's capital, is **never going to welcome and address an official from the neighbouring country** (*dramatization*) with the name given to it by **the treacherous 'Prespes Agreement'** (*dramatization*).

Discussion and conclusions

The winners of the elections, Apostolos Tzitzikostas (tzitzikostas.gr) and Konstantinos Zervas (naisthessaloniki.gr & kzervas.gr), used the MND as a core message for their electoral campaign. On their websites, they promoted and supported the Greekness of Macedonia. They relied on the existing discourse, and they used it to attract citizens' interest to win electoral power. More specifically, the new mayor of Thessaloniki decided to highlight his lineage with one of the Macedonian Struggle fighters to justify his arguments against a solution with the country now-named North Macedonia.



ΔΥΝΑΜΗ
ΖΩΕΣ ΚΑΙ ΠΡΟΟΔΟ
ΠΑΝΙΣΤΙΤΟΥΤΟΣ ΨΩΜΙΑΔΙΣ
for *Επιχειρήσεις*

Το πρόγραμμά μας

ΔΕΙΓΜΑΤΕΙ.

Α. ΣΥΣΤΗΝ ΜΕΤΕΠΟΥ ΕΜΠΕΡΩΣΗΜΕΝΟΝ ΚΑΤΑ ΤΗΣ ΣΥΜΦΩΝΙΑΣ ΤΩΝ ΠΡΕΣΒΙΩΝ

1. Η Η κατασφάλιση της Συμφωνίας των Πρεσβιών θα γίνει μέρος της καθημερινής μας. Με προσφορά της δημοτικής αρχής θα συσταθεί «Μέτρο» Αίτηση από έκδοσης εμπειρογνώμονες – ειδικούς που θα επιχειρήσουν μέσα από διάφορα μέσα την καταγωγή της συμφωνίας σε όλα τα είδη φίλων.

2. Ο Πανηγύριος Ψωμιάδης της δημοτικής της πρωτεύουσας δεν πρόκειται ποτέ να υποβεί και να προσκομίζεται επίσημο από την γενική χώρα με την οικονομία που της χάρισε η πρόδομη Συμφωνία των Πρεσβιών.

Β. ΟΙΚΟΝΟΜΙΚΗ ΔΙΑΘΑΝΕΙΑ

1. Όλα οι εκλεγμένοι δημοτικοί σύμβουλοι του συνδεδασμού θα δηλώσουν όλα τα περιουσιακά στοιχεία τους και θα είναι υποχρεωμένοι να δικαιολογούν κάθε τυχόν αύξηση των περιουσιακών στοιχείων τους.

2. Συνδρομή ορκωτών λογιστών για τον εξονυχιστικό έλεγχο όλων των δημοτικών αρχών, χωρίς τιμητική διάθεση, αλλά για λόγους διαφάνειας και ενημέρωσης. Πρέπει να γνωρίζουμε που πατάμε ώστε να υλοποιήσουμε δραστηριότητες και να προγραμματίσουμε στόχους.

Γ. ΨΑΦΗ ΠΛΗΘΕΣΟΝΙΚΗ ΓΡΑΜΜΗ ΕΠΙΚΟΙΝΩΝΙΑΣ ΠΟΛΙΤΗ ΜΕ ΔΗΜΟ

Η πετυχημένη υφιστάνη στην επιβίβαρχα καθαριότητας, η 113129. Θα μετακομίσει σε εφ' όρουμ Επικοινωνία του Δήμου. Τόσο ο δήμος όσο και ο δήμος συνολικά δεν θα μείνουν ποτέ ξανά ανεπαρκέστες, όπως για παράδειγμα σε θέματα ασφαλών κορυφών, φαινομένων. Η για να μπορώ να πωλείς να επικοινωνούν για πιθανά καθημερινά προβλήματα που εντοπίζονται και σφραγίζουν τον δήμο ώστε να υπάρχει άμεση αντιμετώπιση.

Δ. ΚΥΚΛΟΦΟΡΑΚΟ – ΑΙΤΙΚΗ ΣΥΓΚΟΙΝΩΝΙΑ (ΟΛΕΣ) – ΔΗΜΟΙΟΥΡΓΙΑ ΝΕΩΝ ΧΑΡΤΩΝ ΣΤΑΘΜΕΣΤΗΣ – ΘΑΛΑΣΙΑ ΣΥΓΚΟΙΝΩΝΙΑ

1. Η δημοτική 20.000 νέων μηχανών βιταλών σταθμισμένες. Είναι ένας προγραμματισμένος στόχος ο οποίος θα έδρασε για στην πόλη μας μεδόνοντας πολύ σημαντικό την ταλαιπωρία των οδηγών και το συνεχές εμπόλημα.

2. Ανοδό ανήτων και απαλλοτρίωση αβήλων στην πολυεπίπεδο και εραοία ακινήτων, κενών οικιστικών και ποιούδοστων κτιρίων για την μετατροπή τους

Figure 4: The Program of Panagiotis Psomiadis' Electoral Combination (panagiotispsomiadis.Gr).

Through dramatization and distancing methods, both of their arguments relied heavily on the importance of the Macedonian identity as a part of the Greek cultural and historical heritage.

Several studies have proved the promotion of identity, its construction, and deconstruction imposed by a dominant discourse associated with ideologies and practices. These studies used IDA to explain the use of this discourse and how this dominant discourse is promoting a certain truth (I. Chiluya & Chiluya, 2020; Karyotakis, 2021, 2023; Van Dijk, 1998, 2013). According to McGregor (2003, p. 2), 'the words of those in power are taken as "self-evident truths", and the words of those not in power are dismissed as irrelevant, inappropriate, or without substance'. In the examined case, the dominant discourse is that the solution of the Prespes Agreement will lead to the loss of the Greekness of Macedonia, a part of the Greek identity (an existential threat). However, that fear seems to be unrealistic as North Macedonia has no territorial claims, making the MND a name dispute that has its own life. The dispute is developed around the symbolic power of the name 'Macedonia'.

Even though Zervas and Orfanos are not considered right-wing populists, it is evident that they exploited extreme opinions and arguments that were also used by Panagiotis Psomiadis (panagiotispsomiadis.gr). Psomiadis was once one of the most prominent politicians of Northern Greece, but he has been regarded as radical throughout the last years. According to Chrysosogelos (2017, p. 146): 'Psomiadis' rhetoric combined nationalistic positions on foreign policy (esp. the Macedonia name-issue), religious sentiment, opposition to multiculturalism, and traditionalist positions on new social issues and questions of morality'.

However, Nikos Tachiaos (tachiaos.gr), the official candidate of ND for becoming the mayor of Thessaloniki, did not reproduce this extreme discourse regarding the MND despite his known position against the Prespes Agreement. In addition, he did not exploit the MND as a core tool on his website, showing that not all the ND members supported the non-solution regarding the MND and the viewpoints against the Prespes Agreement so profoundly.

Orfanos (Orfanos.gr), another prominent politician of the right-wing ND, did not use the MND as a key message for his electoral campaign. Nevertheless, like Tzitzikostas, Zervas, and Psomiadis, Orfanos used in an announcement some of the ideas related to the powerful ideological discourse, such as the non-acceptance of a name that includes the term Macedonia and the usurpation of Greek identity by North Macedonia.

The candidates of SYRIZA, the party that backed up the solution in the MND, did not want to reshape the existing powerful discourse about the Greekness of Macedonia. Both tried to avoid the discussion or to communicate their opinion and ideology indirectly about the

issue. It seemed that they did not want to go against the dominant narrative that has been in Greek politics for almost 30 years, promoting a non-solution to the dispute. However, in other crucial polarized issues, such as the refugee crisis, SYRIZA followed a different path by altering the dominant discourse (Christodoulou et al., 2016; Stivas, 2021).

Vougias (polixromi.gr) like Giannoulis (koitamemprosta.gr) and Notopoulou (thessaloniki-mazi.gr) did not openly challenge the dominant narratives linked with the Macedonian, such as the non-solution to the MND. This is surprising considering that Giannoulis and Notopoulou were prominent members of SYRIZA that realized the Prespes Agreement. It seems that the avoidance of referring openly to the Agreement has to do with the possible loss of electoral power. Therefore, the approach aligns with what we have seen in almost 30 years about the MND in Greek politics. The MND, from the politicians' viewpoints, probably is connected with electoral losses for those that challenge the non-solution, as Nimetz (2020) has pointed out. Meanwhile, it seems to be believed that it could provide electoral benefits to the politicians who chose to oppose giving the name Macedonia to Greece's neighbouring country, like Tzitzikostas and Zervas.

Furthermore, the stance of the left-wing candidates, especially from SYRIZA, could be explained by the fact that they share left-wing or communist elements that perceive differently the Macedonian identity, compared to the two main political parties (PASOK and ND) that were dominating the politics in the Greek modern state (Aktürk & Lika, 2022). Securing Macedonia and its Greek identity was, from the 19th century, a crucial issue in Greek politics that was affecting the nationhood cleavage (Mavrogordatos, 1983).

Here lies the important contribution of the paper, as it shows that territorial name disputes can become powerful tools in political competition regardless of actual territorial claims, as, throughout the ageing of these name disputes, they become living entities, including abstract parts of the national identity (Dunbar, 2000) leading to a political war of words (Isidoros, 2017) and a specific discourse. The MND has a life of its own, making it difficult after so many years to distinguish reality from speculation. Keeping alive the dominant truth about the MND seems to be important for provoking irrational reactions and gaining electoral power.

Notes

1. Thessaloniki (or Thessalonike) was Great Alexander's sister.
2. Synaspismos (SYN, Coalition of Left and Progress; renamed Coalition of Left, Movements, and Ecology in 2003) joined a coalition of left-wing parties named SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left) in 2001 (Tsakatika & Eleftheriou, 2013).

SYRIZA negotiated and signed the 2018 Prespes Agreement, which led to renaming FYROM as North Macedonia.

3. In 2019, GD failed to get into the Greek Parliament, and in 2020, the Greek court ruled that Golden Dawn was a criminal organization (Tsatsanis et al., 2020).

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