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The following HEC letter was Published May 9 in the Wall Street Journal Europe.

The article being responded to follows below.

Hellenic Electronic Center (HEC)

A Non-Profit Organization Registered in the US

with 37,000 Hellenes as members and

36 Hellenic associations in the US and abroad

The April 29 op-ed "Balkan Neighbors" by Takis Michas is biased in the extreme against Athens and resembles propaganda emanating from Skopje.

According to Mr. Michas, the dispute between Athens and Skopje is more than just about a name. That is correct, and that is why Greece objects to the use of the name Macedonia by Skopje. Mr. Michas correctly points out that Skopje named its airport after Alexander the Great. That was only the most recent of a string of provocations over the past 16 years, which included Skopje's adoption of the Macedonian Sun of Vergina on its flag, the depiction of the tower of Thessaloniki on its currency, and other claims pertaining to the Macedonian heritage.

Mr. Michas argues that the Greek use of the name "Skopjan" for their neighbors is demeaning. What is really demeaning is that this Slavic population, which has absolutely no historical connections to Alexander the Great and the ancient Macedonians, is trying to claim for itself a history and heritage that belongs to the Greeks. The use of the name Macedonia by the Slavs is itself demeaning to Greece and its citizens as Macedonia is the name of a Northern Greek province. If the Slavs of Skopje are being demeaned, it is by their very own leaders who continue to mislead them about their identity and heritage.

Even critics of Greece have criticized those Slavic extremists who claim to be the descendants of the ancient Macedonians.

Mr. Michas refers to the Greek Civil War, which was provoked by Communist expansionist designs from neighboring Yugoslavia, and implies that Greece is equally at fault as Skopje is for the present dispute. This dispute, though, is easily resolvable provided

Skopje

renounces all claims to the Greek heritage and

territory

of

Macedonia

Athens has already demonstrated good will by establishing diplomatic relations with its neighbor and permitting Greeks to provide economic support.

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Balkan Neighbors

By TAKIS MICHAS [*](#)

[FROM TODAY'S WALL STREET JOURNAL EUROPE](#)

April 29, 2008

Athens

After a recent visit to Skopje, the U.S. envoy to NATO, Victoria Nuland, said that the argument between Greece and Macedonia could be settled "within days or weeks." If only. Unfortunately, the so-called name dispute is far too complex for easy fixes.

First there is the name: Greece wants its northern neighbor to change its constitutional designation, Republic of Macedonia, to something else, perhaps with "New" or "Upper" prefixed. Unless it does so, Greece will continue to block Macedonia's entry into NATO, as it did at this month's Bucharest summit, and presumably the European Union. Athens claims the current name reveals territorial ambitions against its own northern province of Macedonia.

There is also the dispute over the existence of a Macedonian nation. Since the end of World War II, Greece consistently refused to acknowledge such a nation or ethnic group, arguing that it was the "artificial creation" of former Yugoslav strongman Tito. According to this view, the only real Macedonians are ethnic Greeks. Greek officials and most of the media here today refer to Macedonia by the demeaning term "Skopjans."

Then there is the question of language. Greece denies the existence of a Macedonian language, claiming that this is merely a "local idiom" or "dialect."

There is, lastly, the issue of Slav Macedonians who fled Greece after World War II. Greece denies these political refugees and their descendants any "right of return," saying they were traitors who forfeited their claims to citizenship by fighting alongside the Communist-led Democratic Army, which sought the secession of (Greek) Macedonia from Greece. After the defeat of the Communist forces in the Greek Civil War, many of the militants settled in the countries of the former Soviet block, including approximately 30,000 in the neighboring then-Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Their properties in

Greece

were confiscated by the state and reallocated to the inhabitants of the region. In 1983, then Socialist Prime Minister Andreas Papandreu passed a law allowing for the repatriation of the communist political refugees. However, Slav Macedonians were excluded from this deal since the law applied only to ethnic Greeks.

All four areas of dispute are interrelated. All tend to confirm the fears and stereotypes the inhabitants of both countries have about the other.

For the Greeks – especially in the northern regions – the claims concerning the existence of a "Macedonian" nation, language or country as well as for the return of the refugees are seen as part and parcel of Skopje's "irredentism." Recent actions by the Macedonian government, such as the decision to rename the airport in Skopje after Alexander the Great or the circulation in public of maps of "Greater Macedonia" that include parts of Greece, did nothing to allay the fears of many Greeks that the "expansionist" ideology of their neighbor poses a threat to territorial integrity.

On the other side of the border, the picture is inverted. For the Macedonians, Greek attempts to deny them a name, a language, an ethnicity and basic human rights (like "the right to return") are part of the "cultural genocide" of Slav Macedonians that Greece has been waging for the past century. By this view, the ethnic homogenization of northern Greece – which started with the Balkan wars at the beginning of the last century and culminated in the post-World War II settlement in the region – was intended to Hellenize the Slav populations of Northern Greece

According to this view, in the course of the nation-building of modern Greece, key aspects of history, life and culture that didn't conform with the official vision of a single, unitary nation that could trace its lineage back to the days of Pericles were erased. Entire towns and villages disappeared from the map as did the names of a host of public spaces, churches, monasteries, mountains, lakes and rivers. Slavic family and individual names were changed into Greek names. The public use of the Slavic Macedonian language was prohibited.

Contrary to received wisdom, the dispute between Greece and Macedonia isn't over a mere name, but concerns competing national mythologies, symbols and histories. In other words, we

have here all the usual Balkan issues over which people in this part of the world and elsewhere have butchered each other in the distant and not-so-distant past. No easy fix is possible, and a compromise over the name won't put to rest the basic conflict. Unless all the problems are addressed openly and honestly, mutual distrust will persist, ready to erupt again at the first opportunity – or once EU reconstruction funds dry up.

Had Athens and Skopje engaged in serious bilateral or multilateral talks during the past decade on all the points of contention, and not focused simply on the "name," perhaps they would not find themselves in their current, absurd predicament.

* **Mr. Michas, a Greek journalist, is author of "Unholy Alliance: Greece and Milosevic's Serbia" (University of Texas A & M Press, 2002).**

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