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Macedonia name change paves way for science cooperation with Greece

Science features in a deal that ends almost 30 years of hostilities over a shared name.

Julianna Photopoulos



The Greek parliament approved an agreement on name change on 25 January. Credit: Angelos Tzortzinis/AFP/Getty

A political agreement between Greece and its smaller northern neighbour, the Republic of Macedonia, ends a longstanding dispute over the republic's name and sets the stage for

renewed cross-border collaboration in research and higher education.

Ratified by the Greek parliament on 25 January, the Prespa Agreement renames the Republic of Macedonia as the Republic of North Macedonia and is designed to settle the differences and establish strategic partnerships.

The two nations have been at loggerheads for decades over the Republic of Macedonia's name because Greece has a northern region called Macedonia (see 'Name change breakthrough').

NAME-CHANGE BREAKTHROUGH

The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia has agreed to change its name to the Republic of North Macedonia to appease Greece, which has its own region called Macedonia, opening up prospects for more science cooperation, and membership of the European Union.



When a young republic claiming the same name arose from the break-up of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, Greece blocked its attempts to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and, later, the European Union, insisting that it give up calling itself Macedonia.

The parliament of the Republic of Macedonia voted to accept the Prespa Agreement on 11

January.

A bridge to peace

Although the accord has faced fierce opposition from nationalists in both countries, it ends the political stand-off and opens up opportunities for cooperation, including in science, which is one of the areas specifically mentioned in the agreement.

“Scientific diplomacy is an effective tool that can strengthen the relations between Greece and North Macedonia, as well as the Western Balkans in general,” says Greek research minister and laser physicist Costas Fotakis, in Athens. “This agreement is very timely, especially considering that several research themes are of mutual interest in both countries.” He cites biomedicine, agrobiological, energy and the environment as examples of areas where the two nations could now share research infrastructure and exchange expertise.

A spokesperson for the Republic of Macedonia’s science ministry told *Nature* they hope the Prespa agreement will lead to a formal and more detailed deal on scientific and technological cooperation between the two countries.

Scientists in both countries welcome the agreement. They say they will now be able to work together more closely, without the political tensions and rigorous bureaucratic procedures that used to hold them back.

“Cooperation in science between the two countries has been somewhat ‘on ice,’” says biologist Svetislav Krstić at Saints Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, Republic of Macedonia. “The real work in past decades was quite slow and sporadic.”

Although some cross-border science projects funded by the EU do exist and collaborations between scientists working on those projects were good, they have been limited, and the overall atmosphere restrictive, with political issues “constantly lurking”, Krstić says.

“Even the scientific results would be ‘corrected’ in line with the current politics,” he says. “That kind of environment has been nothing but harmful towards all scientific activities.”

He expects this will now change because the parliaments of the two countries have agreed

to end hostilities and start cooperating on a range of topics, including science.

A promising start

One person already collaborating with colleagues across the border is Ioanna Chouvarda, an electrical engineer at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece, who works with scientists in the Republic of Macedonia on electronic-health applications in primary care.

Chouvarda thinks the deal will be good for science collaborations as the political relations improve. “Science is done by people, and many people were affected by the mutually negative spirit among the two countries that prevailed in the past years,” she says.

Krstić agrees. “This can only mean a better and more prosperous future for both countries,” he says.

Additional reporting by Bojan Stojkovski.

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