

What's in a name?

Juliet:
"What's in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet."

Romeo and Juliet (II, ii, 1-2)

What's this famous line from Shakespeare's play got to do with the changing of the streets' names in Skopje, the capital of the Republic of Macedonia, one might ask? Simple, names as such do not matter for what people hold dear. Connect them to objects or subjects that people hold dear and things change drastically. That applies for the streets' names as well. They are artificially given from some previous local or governmental authority in some previous times and maybe then as well the uproar that was caused was as big as or even bigger than the one that happened last month in Skopje. People living on those streets do not love the names of the streets as such but their memories and previous experiences which occurred on them and are part of their memories, automatically connecting them to the mentioned street. It is widely known that changing the name of any street is bound not to be welcomed as people do not identify themselves with the strange new and foreign name as it means nothing to them.

Background of the process or re-naming the streets in Skopje

The initiatives to change some of the most prominent names of the streets in Skopje have been long present in various forms. Each administration that comes to rule the capital always wants to leave its own print on the city and to push its agenda about what the city should look like. Since the earthquake in 1963 there has never been a consensus about the direction in which the capital should be developed. Should all the destroyed buildings be rebuilt? Should a new modern city rise from the ashes? Same goes with the streets names. The city has been expanding tremendously and seems as a melting pot for all the groups and sub-groups of the Macedonian society. The project Skopje 2014 is just another try to give the city an identity that divided and polarizes the citizens of this place yet again.

In this light, the latest proposals in the Skopje city council were to change or update the names of around

300 streets, bridges, squares etc. Among the proposals there were Macedonian and world's historic figures, singers, artists, events that occurred, etc. The citizens were informed however that although the city council will change the names of the streets they live on, they will have no obligation to change their IDs (in Macedonia it is obligatory to have the full name and number of the street the person lives on written in the personal identification card) which was a sign of relief.

How did it happen?

However, the main issue was that there were no public debates prior about why are certain streets names going to be changed and how and why were the new names chosen. Case in point:

the main walking street in the city centre was finally and officially changed from "Marshal Tito" to "Makedonija". There was no disagreement here as everyone called this street "Makedonija" for almost two decades although officially it still had its old name. The disputes seemed to arise from changing streets names that are somewhat 'legendary' to the people of Skopje (like Leninova and Vodnjanska), due to choosing historical personalities that are very much controversial among Macedonians for centuries and not just nowadays or because some of them have become famous for the objects there are there or for what has happened there. Another case in point: the street "Bihakjka" will no longer exist, and this famous street where neighbors are the headquarters of the opposition party SDSM and the Prime Minister's residence, will be renamed "Pavel Satev¹." Naturally the opposition saw and presented this as an intrusion into their headquarters by the ruling party (this led to many public quarrels over the media between them and VMRO). Other more significant changes include: after the tragically killed president Boris Trajkovski will be named the street "Prvomajska"; the boulevard "Vojvodina" will be named after the first president of independent Macedonia Kiro Gligorov; a street in downtown Skopje also got a name after the first prime minister of independent Macedonia, Nikola Kljusev (the old "Maxim Gorky"); the street "Vodnjanska" will become street "Majka Teresa" and the street "Mito Hadzivašilev Jasmin," will become "St. Cyril and Methodius", "Stiv Naumov²" will be "Todor Aleksandrov³", "Leninova" will be "Aminta III" etc.

On the day of the voting of the Council of the City of Skopje, 14th of June 2012, there was an attempt for interrupting the voting session by a group of citizens

who opposed the changing of the streets names in the capital. The opposition party SDSM asked for this topic to be taken off the agenda and made the request the Council of the City of Skopje to put the issue of changing the streets names on referendum. As none of their proposals were accepted they walked out the council, so the rest of the council members voted for the changing the names of 300 streets and other infrastructure objects in Skopje.

Without making it a discussion of who is right and who is wrong in this particular case, a point can be made saying that changing names when it is due (giving streets to famous past presidents, artists etc.) should never be a problem. Leaving out however, more controversial historic personalities might be a necessary measure for the societal peace in a society young as the Macedonian, as it yet has to deal with much of its past. Elected authorities do have the tendency to work and plan only to the point their mandates allow them to, not taking into consideration the fact that people will be living on those streets for the next 30, 40, 50 years. A name as such does not make a difference to the new generations that come but if we happen to change them too often we risk losing the connections between our own past and memories and the streets of this city and country where those memories were formed and carried on from generation to generation.

1 Revolutionary who was part of the famous "Gemidzii" that fought for independent Macedonia under the Ottoman Empire

(http://www.veles.gov.mk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=27&Itemid=51&limitstart=1 – link in Macedonian) but under the communist regime of Yugoslavia and Macedonia he was considered as the enemy of the state.

2 Macedonian partisan who fought in the Second World War.

3 Highly controversial figure from Macedonian history. Everybody from historians to politicians is divided on his role in the Macedonian history. For some he was a revolutionary, part of the VMRO in that period that fought for independent Macedonia. For others, he worked for the interests of Bulgaria at the time and allegedly was responsible for the assassinations of other Macedonian fighters. (<http://www.mkd.mk/37815/izdvojuvame/todor-aleksandrov-od-bugarski-spion-do-naigolem-makedonski-revolucioner/> - link in Macedonian).

Written Sonja Zuber, Research and Management Coordinator, Analytica Think Tank

sristeska@analyticamk.org