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# The story of two successful and contentious securitizations of the Macedonian name dispute in Greece

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## ABSTRACT

As there is still room for exploring the securitization process as a part of the Securitization Theory, this research paper shows that the securitization process can be contentious. There were at least two successful securitization processes in the MND. The current study interviewed 18 political members of the coalition government led by Syriza and 24 opposition members from Spring 2019 to 2020. The interviews focused on the events associated with the Macedonian Name Dispute (MND), which overshadowed the Greek discourse from 2018 to 2019 and supposedly solved one of the world's oldest and most potent territorial name disputes. The first securitization process was promoted by the government, and the other by the dominant right-wing opposition party of New Democracy, which eventually became the new government after the national elections on 7 July 2019. In this contentious process, the side that exploited the media seemed to maintain its securitization longer.

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## Introduction

At the beginning of 2019 (12 February), the Prespes Agreement took effect. Prespes Agreement renamed Greece's neighbouring country from the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) to North Macedonia (Un.org 2019). This historic accord became a landmark for the European Union (EU), Balkan countries, and other international powers such as the United States of America (USA) and Russia, as it opened the way for the small country of North Macedonia to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the EU (European Commission 2019; Nauert 2018).

Due to an old territorial name dispute, Greece was blocking North Macedonia's access to the organizations. The name dispute between Greece and North Macedonia has developed over the last three decades. The main problem was that Greece was unwilling to agree to name the neighbouring country, Macedonia. For the Greeks, Macedonia is an essential part of the Greek identity and culture. Surprisingly, the Macedonian Name Dispute (MND) historically seems to be one of the most potent mobilization issues in the

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Greek discourse. It has provoked massive protests and probably the largest gathering in Greece's 200 years since its war of independence against the Ottoman Empire. Around a million people in 1992 gathered in Thessaloniki, the capital of the Land of Macedonia, to show that Greece would never agree with the name Macedonia because this action could be perceived as an existential threat of losing not only the cultural heritage of Macedonia associated with Alexander the Great but also the Greek territory called Macedonia (Barker 2001; Topalova 2020).

The feeling that Greece is threatened by allowing the name Macedonia to the neighbouring country has been a part of the country's discourse for many years, especially after the 1990s and on with the government of New Democracy (ND) and Prime Minister Konstantinos Mitsotakis. Mitsotakis' government is believed to have intensified the dispute in 1991, in which the then Foreign Minister, Antonis Samaras, was accused of being the first official to sign a document referring to Greece's neighbouring country as the Republic of Macedonia (Karyotakis 2023).

Nevertheless, Samaras disagreed with using the name Macedonia for the neighbouring country. From his viewpoint, the name Macedonia must be protected at all costs. That viewpoint was against Mitsotakis and provoked an internal conflict inside the ND that led to the government's fall in 1993, as some parliamentarians followed Samaras and created a political party named Political Spring. Despite its different ideological background, PASOK, which formed the new government of Greece, also followed a hard stance protecting the Greekness of Macedonia at all costs (Karyotakis 2023).

The feeling of this existential threat was revived once again in 2018 due to the two countries' initiatives to solve the name dispute. For all the competing sides, including powerful actors such as the EU, United Nations (UN), and the USA, it was a perfect chance to fix this paradoxical relationship between these two countries. The two countries had governments formed by moderate and left-wing parties for the first time. More specifically, in the Greek case, Syriza and its left and communist legacy perceived the dispute about Macedonia differently than the former governments (Karyotakis 2023). It was believed that both governmental parties could peacefully resolve the dispute. According to the UN Secretary-General, 'Athens and Skopje demonstrate that even seemingly intractable issues can be resolved through dialogue and political will' (Un.org 2019).

However, in the internal politics of both countries, several incidents occurred that threatened both governments. In particular, Syriza's government in Greece lost its coalition party and had to obtain other individual parliamentarians' support to ratify the Prespes Agreement and keep its majority in the parliament (Table 1). In addition, other parties of the parliament were dissolved due to the agreement. Besides, Syriza's government had to deal with the continuous unrest of many citizens against solving the name dispute. Apart from these facts, the Greek government took emergency actions against even foreign interference by expelling foreign diplomats to support the anti-government movement (Tzogopoulos 2019; Topalova 2020).

ND, the dominant party of the right-wing ideological spectrum in the country for almost half a century, run by the son of Konstantinos Mitsotakis, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, was one of those parties that used the MND as a communication tool throughout 2018 and 2019. That action contributed to winning all the elections in Greece in 2019. In particular, ND won the European Parliament and the local elections (26 May 2019–

**Table 1.** A timeline of the key events related to the ratification of the Prespes Agreement from 2018 to 2019.

Date	Country	Event
13 June 2018 & 20 June 2018	North Macedonia	Ratification of the Prespes Agreement by the Macedonian parliament with 69 MPs out of the 120 MPs.
17 June 2018	Greece & North Macedonia	The countries' foreign ministers signed the Prespes Agreement.
25 June 2018	Greece	Greece informed NATO that it no longer opposes the acceptance of North Macedonia.
30 September 2018	North Macedonia	94% voted in favour of changing the name, but the participation was less than 50% to validate the results.
3 December 2018	North Macedonia	The Macedonian parliament approved the required constitutional change for the Prespes Agreement.
11 January 2019	North Macedonia	The Macedonian parliament completed the legal implementation of the Prespes Agreement.
16 January 2019	Greece	The Greek government survived the no-confidence vote with 151 votes out of 300 MPs initiated by ND.
25 January 2019	Greece	The Greek parliament ratified the Prespes Agreement with a majority of 153 out of 300 MPs.
26 May 2019	Greece	After the poor performance in the local elections and the loss in the European elections, Alexis Tsipras announced snap elections.
7 July 2019	Greece	Kyriakos Mitsotakis and ND won the national elections and formed the new government of Greece.

2 June 2019) and forced the then-government to organize national elections on the 7th of July, in which it won easily and formed the new government of the country (Armakolas et al. 2019).

Subsequently, this study pays close attention to the discourse of these 2 years (2018 and 2019), analysing the main narratives through qualitative interviews. This paper's main argument is that the two main contentious narratives in the local political competition are two different securitization processes. Thus, to what extent can we talk about a contentious securitization process?

### **Securitization, Prespes Agreement, and contentious securitized discourse**

Securitization Theory (ST) was developed from international relations to provide in-depth explanations regarding creating a security threat and understanding conflicts and wars. Wæver and his colleagues' perspectives moved away from the traditional approaches of security and international relations studies. According to them (1998), many aspects (objects) in society can be promoted and eventually become security threats if specific securitization actions exist. For instance, even issues associated with identity, such as the MND in this study, can be securitized and perceived as an existential threat.

This assumption comes mainly from Wæver's (Wæver 1995; Wæver et al. 1993) ideas about an existing societal discourse, in which there is a consensus that the more security, the better it is for society. Therefore, ST is believed to be an outcome of the discourse. According to Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde (1998), for creating a security (or an existential) threat, there must also be the use of an emergency act (or acts) for protecting the threatened object by the person that initiates the creation of the threat (securitizer), and the consent of the audience for these actions (acceptance of the audience). If those criteria are not met, there is no successful securitization process.

However, there is a lively academic debate for every part of the ST. For instance, Balzacq (2011) argues that the context regarding the securitization process must also be considered when examining it. This argument about the context can be associated with Waever's arguments about the existing discourse. That is the point at which this paper tries to situate itself. Media could influence the promotion of the main narrative that presents an object as an existential (or security) threat (Schäfer et al. 2016).

A few studies have examined the role of news media and journalists in securitization. Vultee (2010a; 2010b) was the first scholar to pay close attention to the ST and its connections with the field of communication and journalism. For Vultee, the securitization process can offer a new type of framing for understanding the news content. Specifically, ST and framing theory can be connected, providing a new media framing approach. The role of the news media can result in empowering specific actors. These actors can impose their securitized narrative and empower individuals' identity characteristics (identity politics) through the media. Identity politics is an easy empowerment tool for political actors (George 2016), and the securitization process can be a part of it (Malmvig 2014).

Furthermore, different and opposing narratives can result in controversies, which can blur the facts about the problem and its very existence, leading to contention amongst the competing sides. Security decisions based on such controversial incidents can even harm journalists' freedom in reporting securitized issues (Monsees 2020). Furthermore, studying those contentious issues can 'show how specific truth-claims came to be acknowledged as "facts"' (Monsees 2020, 4).

The recent events related to the Prespes Agreement and the MND are associated with contentious narratives that aimed to securitize the agreement to realize each side's goals. More specifically, in Greece, we had two main contentious narratives supported by the two most influential parties in the country. Syriza, as we will see in the following paper's sections based on the relevant literature (Karyotakis 2022, 2023), tried to convince the public and the parliamentarians that it could provide a peaceful resolution and stability in the Balkans. Adding to Syriza's securitization arguments, it was also highlighted that by signing the Prespes Agreement, Greece was again becoming a dominant political actor in the region. A non-successful agreement could further destabilize the Balkans and North Macedonia. That is why Syriza had to implement emergency actions, such as breaking the coalition government with ANEL, risking losing the parliamentary majority, and being unsuccessful in completing the accord (Syriza's Account 2012–2019 2020).

In the end, Syriza successfully ratified the Prespes Agreement and convinced the majority of the parliamentarians (acceptance of the audience) but needed help to make its securitized narrative accepted by the public. The loss in the elections of 2019 proved right the prediction of United Nations Special Representative for the MND, Matthew Nimetz, that the solution to the MND, if it includes the name Macedonia to Greece's neighbouring country, would lead to electoral losses (Nimetz 2020).

On the other hand, ND exploited what was already accepted by most Greek audiences, the dominant securitized narrative disseminated from the 1990s. Macedonia is only Greek, and its name must be protected at all costs as if it were given to the neighbouring country, Greece would lose a part of its identity, including possible territorial loss (Amna. gr 2019a; Kambas and Papadimas 2018; Christopoulos and Karpozilos 2018) – such an existential threat justified emergency acts, such as the no-confidence vote against the

coalition government. The win of ND in the elections of 2019 proved that the majority of the Greek audience accepted its securitized narrative (Karyotakis 2022).

The MND's threatening reality and its overemphasis in the public discourse are paradoxical, considering that in the twentieth century, during the wars for the acquisition of Macedonia and its supposed capital, Thessaloniki, Greeks were the ones who won against the other competitors. This winning strike did not happen in other cases, such as with Albania and Turkey, especially in Cyprus (Heraclides 2019; Loizides 2015). The Macedonian issue had a less threatening effect on Greece. However, its empowerment in the public discourse seems to have happened primarily because of the short-sighted logic of the political elites who made a series of mistakes, such as thinking that Greece, as the most powerful country in the dispute, would be able to force the neighbouring country to accept its will (Veremis 2010).

As Loizides (2020, 8) has pointed out, the Greek policy regarding the MND was so extreme that it 'exceeded even responses towards militarized crises in the Aegean and Cyprus with Turkey leading in the case of the Macedonian dispute to official government embargoes initiated by two consecutive Greek governments.' The governments emphasized the need to make the people accept this reality and support efforts, such as consumer boycotts of EU countries that supported North Macedonia, protests, and petitions (Loizides 2020).

Also, it is worth mentioning that the Macedonian issue and the MND were included in the so-called Greek 'national matters,' which are believed to be important affairs that allow the restriction of 'any voice that goes against the standing positions of Greek foreign policy on matters concerning the country's international relations' (Christopoulos and Karpozilos 2018, 25).

Meanwhile, in North Macedonia, contentious securitization processes existed between the competing sides. Even though the paper focuses on Greek events, they are worth mentioning. In North Macedonia, the right-wing and ultra-nationalistic party of VMRO-DPMNE, under the leadership of Nikola Gruevski, who governed the country for a decade (2006–2016), put a strong emphasis on connecting North Macedonia with the legacy of Alexander the Great and his father, intensifying the MND and the problems with Greece. For Gruevski supporters, the country must not give in to Greece's demands and continue supporting its strong association with the ancient Macedonian Kingdom. By signing the Prespes Agreement, North Macedonia agreed that there was no connection between Alexander the Great and his legacy. In that way, the country lost probably the most essential characteristic of its national identity. That securitized narrative and its acceptance by many Macedonians led to demonstrations and difficulties in ratifying the accord (Topalova 2020; Marusic 2018; Petkovski 2016; Armakolas and Petkovski 2019).

Zoran Zaev, as the Prime Minister and leader of the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia party, formed the government that realized the Prespes Agreement after Gruevski. Zaev's party had to agree and realize fundamental changes to achieve an agreement with Greece, including a successful referendum and alterations in the country's constitution. Despite the strong opposition, Zaev succeeded and agreed with Greece (Table 2). According to the securitized narrative of the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia, the Prespes Agreement could be the last chance for Greece to stop blocking the country's acceptance in NATO and the EU. A non-successful agreement could destabilize North Macedonia (Topalova 2020; Armakolas and Petkovski 2019).

**Table 2.** The securitization processes regarding the name Macedonia.

Securitizer	Examples of Emergency Acts	Securitized Object	Audience Acceptance
Syriza	Breaking the coalition government with ANEL Expelling Russian diplomats with the accusation of supporting anti-government actions Spreading the narrative that a non-successful agreement could further destabilize the Balkans and North Macedonia, threatening Greece	Name Macedonia	Success in convincing the parliamentarians about the Prespes Agreement's value
New Democracy	No-confidence vote against the government Spreading the narrative that giving the name Macedonia would lead even to territorial losses for Greece Removal of the ND president of the Prefectural Administrative Committees in Thessaloniki, Vasiliki Eftaxa, because of not being against the Prespes Agreement	Name Macedonia	Success in convincing the public that the Prespes Agreement was flawed for Greece
VMRO-DPMNE	No-confidence vote against the government	Name Macedonia	Unsuccessful securitization
Social Democratic Union of Macedonia	Referendum Changes in the country's constitution	Name Macedonia	Success in convincing the public and the parliamentarians

The following section presents the paper's methods and the data used to provide insights regarding the extent to which the securitization processes were considered contentious.

## Methods and data

For this research, 18 semi-structured interviews with political members of the coalition government led by Syriza and 24 interviews with opposition members were conducted from the Spring of 2019 to 2020 (Table 3). The interviews consisted of questions about the narratives of the MND's events in 2018–2019.

The interviewees were active actors in the Greek political scene during the recent events related to the MND (Table A1, see APPENDIX). For instance, the Greek anti-fascist movement organized several counter-demonstrations against the protests that did not accept solving the dispute and giving the name Macedonia to Greece's neighbouring country (Abc.net.au 2018; Smith 2019).

Interviews have not been conducted previously to study the recent MND events (Karyotakis 2022, 2023; Maatsch and Kurpiel 2021), which provides a different view regarding the events related to the Prespes Agreement. The interviews allow us to see what prominent political actors believe about such a contentious issue and gain access to unavailable information. Elites can shape public opinion and affect lives inside and outside their organization (Solarino and Aguinis 2021; Leech 2002).

**Table 3.** The political position of the interviewees.

Political Position	Number of Interviewees
Members of the Coalition Government	18
Opposition Members	
Opposition Party Members in the Parliament	9
Anti-fascist Individuals (non-parliament members)	15

A few past studies used a similar sample focused on the viewpoints and attitudes towards the European Union and the financial crisis (Freire et al. 2014; Nezi et al. 2010). As almost all the interviewees were participating in strategic decisions in their organizations, their perspectives regarding the examined period could provide valuable insights unknown to the public. Qualitative interviews are used as a research method to ‘gain in-depth knowledge from participants about particular phenomena, experiences, or sets of experiences’ (DeMarrais 2004, 52). Therefore, the following research question was asked (RQ1):

**RQ1:** What are the interviewees’ viewpoints about the dissemination of Syriza and ND narratives regarding the 2018–2019 events of the MND?

The average time of the interviews was 22 minutes. During the writing of this paper, most of the participants were still active in Greek politics and held influential positions in the government, political parties, and organizations.

The participants were recruited using referral sampling based on their role in the political organization and party. The participants covered a broad ideological and political spectrum, as they belonged from right-wing to far-left politics. In particular, many of the interviewed anti-fascists were also decision-making figures of the Anarchist movement in Greece. This specific sampling method was used because the research explores a delicate political issue in Greece that can provoke extreme reactions, such as mob attacks against individuals. Besides, the current study population can only be traced with an insider’s help, as some participants were members of political organizations known for not trusting outsiders (Croeser and Highfield 2015; Johnson 2014).

Also, many interviewees were reluctant to express their viewpoints without ensuring that their participation would be anonymous, as they feared their political organization would take action against them. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that in the 1990s, expressing a positive view regarding a possible solution to the MND could be considered a criminal act (Petsini and Christopoulos 2016).

Therefore, the participants’ anonymity was secured, and this sampling technique was chosen as suitable for investigating the main different securitized contentious narratives and processes dominating the Greek discourse in the MND incidents.

In addition, regarding the ST, the presented analysis that includes speech acts and the idea of the existential threat is presented as an organic outcome of the collected empirical data provided by the interviews following similar research that has argued that the presentation of an event as an existential threat in the discourse constitutes a securitization effort from a sociological approach focusing on a sample size that deals with people of authority and power (Ejdus and Božović 2017; Stivas 2023; Campion 2020; Floyd 2016). Following Ambrosio et al. (2020, 163), the securitized narratives that involve an existential threat are those that ‘emerge through a fundamental reframing of an object into an existential threat to the securitizing actor and its interests.’

In the current study, it is believed that this is happening as the success of the securitization process relied on former related research and publications proving that both parties perceived the Prespes Agreement as a security threat for Greece and successfully used their narrative to convince the public (Karyotakis 2022, 2023, Syriza’s Account 2012–2019; 2020; Kambas and Papadimas 2018;

Christopoulos and Karpozilos 2018; Heraclides 2019; Loizides 2020). In the case of Syriza, the MPs accepted its narrative. They supported the government in implementing the Prespes Agreement, but the public disapproved of it in the European, local, and national elections. On the other hand, ND was unsuccessful in overthrowing the government through the ‘no-confidence vote’ but gained the acceptance of the public and the elections that made it the new government of Greece.

The current study enhances our understanding regarding the MND, as it provides a different explanation than previous studies (Maatsch and Kurpiel 2021) for the reasons behind realizing the Prespes Agreement through the conducted interviews with an important number of the political protagonists involved. The ST highlights the different narratives linked to an existential threat that might have forced the political elites to agree or disagree with the proposed solution.

As a result, the following sections of the paper deal with the study of the two competing parties regarding the recent events of the MND and the Prespes Agreement, providing the main common concerns and arguments that the interviewees pointed out.

### **Syriza: Prespes Agreement was an existential threat for Greece and the party**

The current section presents Syriza’s different viewpoints regarding the Prespes Agreement and the relevant events. For Syriza, the Prespes Agreement strengthened the connections between North Macedonia and the EU, empowering Greece’s role in the Balkans. Without that, North Macedonia would face internal conflicts that could even lead to its dissolution or the support of countries against Greece’s interests. Furthermore, the non-solution to the MND could threaten the role of the EU in the Balkans, a viewpoint that has been highlighted before (Mavromatidis 2010, Syriza’s Account 2012–2019; 2020).

Interviewee A (personal communication, 27 February 2020), a prominent member of the coalition government in Northern Greece led by Syriza, argued that the problem regarding Syriza, the MND, and the support of the Prespes Agreement was that the party did not communicate to the public the importance of the accord. The neighbouring country lost more than Greece because of the Prespes Agreement. For example, North Macedonia even changed its constitution to ratify the Prespes Agreement. Interviewee A highlighted that the provided solution between the two countries was the perfect chance for Syriza to help the country, the EU, and NATO by settling the dispute.

It is an agreement that resolves the conflict between the two countries in the best possible way. It restores, to a great degree, the historical truth, benefiting Greece. At the same time, it also positively restores our country’s cultural heritage.

Interviewee B (personal communication, 19 April 2019), a former Minister of the government led by Syriza, agreed with interviewee A and provided more in-depth insights into the delicate issue of the name dispute. The accord benefited Greece because there was intense pressure on North Macedonia. Without a deal, there would be a tremendous conflict in Greece’s neighbouring country’s political competition that could lead to unprecedented turmoil and the possible dismantling of North Macedonia. Therefore, the Greek government provided North Macedonia with the

pathway for constructing a national identity narrative. However, as a result, it imposed some demands that would not be accepted under different circumstances.

Furthermore, according to him, many higher-ranking Syriza members knew that failing to ratify the agreement could provoke an uncontrollable destabilization of the Balkans, undermining Greece's powerful position and promoting a more active role for Turkey. This existential threat has been communicated to several influential Syriza members, but the party failed to disseminate this version of the threat to the public.

Interviewee C (personal communication, 25 February 2020), an experienced Syriza executive member, argued that except for this narrative about Greece's existential threat, several influential members of Syriza made clear that the party was obliged to work out a joint solution with North Macedonia.

According to him, as a left-wing party, Syriza could not support nationalistic views that would undermine the peaceful relationship between Balkan and European countries. The party had to realize this accord to show the public and its members that its government differed from its predecessors. After all, the MND was a severe identity issue for Syriza itself:

Given Syriza's ideological narrative, internationalism, view on foreign policy, and the struggle of the left to strengthen the friendship between the peoples of the Balkans, the Prespes Agreement was a part of Syriza's DNA. I want to remind you that our renewed, radical, and communist left was an example of political dignity and democracy, as it did not participate in the big rallies of 1992. Every other party, including the Coalition of the Left of Movements and Ecology (SYN) and the Communist Party of Greece (KKE), participated in the aforementioned rallies.

Syriza was formed as a coalition party with the participation of SYN, the largest left-wing party in the coalition. Interviewee C's arguments that the party's fraction came from the traditions of the renewed, communist, and radical left and had different viewpoints about the MND align with existing literature (Karyotakis 2023), pointing out that Syriza perceived the MND differently compared to the other leading political parties of Greece.

Solving the MND was a must that could not be bypassed under the circumstances. That is one of the reasons why there were significant disagreements inside the government regarding this issue. Many politicians of Syriza seemed to believe that it was the last chance for Greece to redeem itself for all the wrongdoings that had occurred in the past concerning the MND. Without a solution, many interviewees believed that Greece could be threatened with further destabilization of the Balkans and that it could lose once and for all its association with the legacy of Alexander the Great. In addition, Alexis Tsipras thought that the accord was an essential step in making Greece again a leading entity in the politics of the Balkans. The Prespes Agreement would help the EU to expand, win more support for Syriza from those countries that wanted a solution to the MND, such as the USA, and, finally, become the dominant entity in the local political scene. As ND was against the solution, Syriza would appear as the country's political party with a true pro-European profile (Chryssogelos 2021). Nevertheless, Tsipras' political admissions were not realized as the MND contributed to losing the national elections in 2019 (Nimetz 2020).

Interviewee D (personal communication, 26 February 2020), an MP of Syriza, explained that the Prespes Agreement did not provide the right to self-determination.

Also, it was making Greece the ‘policeman’ of the Balkans. However, the period’s difficult circumstances and the uprising of the nationalistic movement in both countries, including the extreme campaigns promoted by the opposition parties, made the Prespes Agreement a ‘balanced solution.’

At this point, it should be mentioned that almost all of the interviewees agreed that the MND had become so powerful in the Greek discourse that its resolution would have a political cost, as the government had to question a dominant narrative linking the name Macedonia to the Greek ideological and national construction.

Nevertheless, Syriza had to accept and deal with this reality. For interviewee E (personal communication, 19 April 2019), an old member of the party for around two decades, it was evident that the international community was considering the MND as a ‘pointless conflict’ that ‘has been in the political news of the two countries’ foreign policy for 27 years and had to be resolved.’ For him, the Prespes Agreement was a tool for integrating North Macedonia into the EU and NATO and stopping Turkey’s ambitions to control another country in the Balkans and threaten further Greece. The proposed accord aimed at protecting stability and peace. As a result, it was believed that there was no alternative solution:

The Prespes Agreement was bold. Greece is gaining much more than the Republic of Skopje. The Prespes Agreement is a good deal for the country and both peoples and for peace and co-development in the region. In one way or another, the MND had to end. I believe that the reactions have become milder in both countries, and the subsequent period will show the importance of the agreement.

### **ND’s existential threat: the loss of the Greek identity**

ND and several opposition parties in Greece decided to go against the main narrative of the government led by Syriza. For them, the Prespes Agreement was not a solution but an act of creating more problems for the country. As the most powerful actor in the dispute, Greece showed weakness. Macedonia was an essential part of Greece. As a result, the agreement’s signing could be perceived as a betrayal or treason for Greece (Karyotakis 2022, 2023; Christopoulos and Karpozilos 2018).

According to interviewee F (personal communication, 20 February 2020), an ND politician, the Prespes Agreement recognized and gave the neighbouring country the ‘Macedonian name, language, and ethnicity.’ Subsequently, these three elements could be used as a ‘legitimizing basis for the redemptive dispositions of the neighboring state. As if that were not enough, the agreement offered the NATO membership as a gift.’ Therefore, for interviewee E, it was not surprising that many people protested against the supposed solution promoted by the government, as ‘the extent of the damage to the Greek national interests’ that this agreement would cause became obvious. This rightly provoked the patriotic concerns of Greek society.’

Interviewee E’s viewpoints aligned with those expressed by Kyriakos Mitsotakis on several occasions. Mitsotakis, as the leader of ND, referred to the Prespes Agreement as a mistake and a national defeat, as Syriza and ANEL allowed ‘FYROM to monopolize the Macedonian identity, as the government granted the neighboring country the recognition of a Macedonian language, ethnicity, and identity’ (Amna.gr 2019a).

Independent Greeks (ANEL) was the other governmental coalition party that, with Syriza, ruled Greece from 2015 to 2019. The Prespes Agreement led to the break up of the coalition, as ANEL was against agreeing to name Macedonia the neighbouring country. The coalition government lasted longer than expected, as ANEL was a right-wing party with nationalistic and populist characteristics formed by Panos Kammenos, a former ND politician (Armakolas and Petkovski 2019; Aslanidis and Rovira Kaltwasser 2016).

Besides, some citizens and news media understood that the ND, as the new government of Greece, would have tried to cancel the agreement (Greekcitytimes.com 2018) or reduce the dreadful consequences for Greece (Ekathimerini.com 2019). According to Mitsotakis, ‘the recognition of the so-called Macedonian language opens Pandora’s box to revive all the historically groundless claims of Skopje’ (Michalopoulos 2018).

The opinions about changing the Prespes Agreement after the winning of national elections and the government’s formation by ND seemed to be shared by several ND political members. That aspect was identified even among some members of Parliament. For interviewee G (personal communication, 26 June 2019), a young politician of ND, one of the problems that would change would be the name of the neighbouring country. The agreement’s geographical designation was correct, but it should have clarified the Slavic heritage of North Macedonia. According to him, with an ND government, ‘there will be some changes mainly in securing certain aspects, as Skopje, without the help of Greece, cannot become an EU or NATO. There will certainly be renegotiations.’

For interviewee H (personal communication, 18 April 2019), an influential member of the Kyriakos Mitsotakis’ government, there would also be a chance for a separate agreement if ND becomes the government. However, she pointed out that the neighbouring country’s name could not change because Greece had a series of agreements with ‘Skopje’ that led to this specific accord. As a result, making significant changes to the Prespes Agreement would jeopardize the bilateral relationships between Greece and North Macedonia.

According to interviewee H, if Greece initiated an act of reviewing the Prespes Agreements, North Macedonia would also have the chance to impose new demands that may be worse than the agreed ones. Such an action could have dangerous consequences for Greece. That is why it ‘cannot be formally altered.’ Nevertheless, ND, as the country’s new government, could promote various other viewpoints with ‘different agreements.’

Interviewee I (personal communication, 19 April 2019), another member of ND in the Greek parliament, agreed with interviewee H that the Prespes Agreement could not be altered significantly. However, ND’s government would have a different approach concerning the MND than the Syriza coalition government. According to his opinions:

There may be differences in the parts of the agreement that concern the work regarding brands, names, products, and textbooks. There may also be a different management of North Macedonia’s acceptance in NATO and the EU, but this does not concern the agreement itself but rather its political management.

Based on these ideas, interviewee J (personal communication, 19 April 2019), another experienced ND, highlighted that the aim in the first place should have been to be a different accord with different ‘parameters that would better favor the Greek interests.’ Interviewee J’s opinion aligned with another ideological construction promoted by the

ND even after becoming the government. In order to appeal to its voters, some members of the government blamed Syriza for the MND events, although ND's government did not make any change and even firmly supported the Prespes Agreement (Keptalkinggreece.com 2019; Amna.gr 2019b; Karyotakis 2022, 2023).

For instance, Sofia Voultepsi, an ND MP and a former Undersecretary to the Prime Minister and Government Spokesperson, with the occasion of the 2020 elections in North Macedonia, claimed that 'it is now clear that the agreement has fully served the interests of Skopje.' Besides, she added that Syriza is to be blamed for giving the right to citizens of North Macedonia 'to call themselves Macedonians, to say that they come from Macedonia and to call their language Macedonian' (Voultepsi 2020a). In addition, Voultepsi, like other ND parliamentarians, highlighted that the Prespes Agreement did not stabilize or deal successfully with nationalism in North Macedonia. On the contrary, it seemed to have intensified the hostility in the local political scene (Voultepsi 2020b). These statements aligned with the extreme emphasis on the MND by the former governments and its dreadful implications (Heraclides 2019; Loizides 2015; Veremis 2010).

### **The governmental versus ND's viewpoint for the MND's public narratives**

According to the government's members, the governmental narrative regarding the Prespes Agreement and its importance could not be communicated to the public. For interviewee K (personal communication, 25 February 2020), a prominent then-government member whose job was to deal with the news media and disseminate the party's narratives, Syriza always had a problem communicating such contentious issues. The main problem was that it could not access the media and, therefore, could not spread its securitized narrative. For interviewee K, the private news media across the country did not have the will to show the narrative that challenged the existing knowledge regarding the MND. Since there was no access to the news media, Syriza could have tried to inform the citizens through public events before and after the Prespes Agreement.

Nevertheless, there was the fear that such a communication strategy could have resulted in physical attacks against Syriza's members. Subsequently, interviewee K had 'the feeling that the government did the best it could.' Despite the difficult times throughout that period, the government ratified the Prespes Agreement. Interviewee K explained that the name dispute and the problem of communicating it lies on the shoulders of the current government formed by ND, 'which should explain why, while ND was against the Agreement and won the elections with various lies after becoming the government, started supporting it.'

For most interviewees, indeed, the dominant party of the right-wing political scene in Greece, ND, had better media access and exploited the news media to communicate on a broader scale its securitized narrative regarding the MND to realize the audience's acceptance. Interviewee L (personal communication, 24 June 2020), an influential member of the anarchist anti-fascist movement, underlined that the MND events' coverage was one-sided. The most prominent news media's main goal was to communicate that Macedonia is Greek and must be protected from the Prespes Agreement. Such media coverage was helping the securitization process of ND. Indeed, research during that period proved that unbalanced news coverage was against the Prespes Agreement and

supported ND's narratives (Karyotakis 2022). In addition, research in the 1990s has demonstrated that most of the media outlets accepted and disseminated the nationalistic view that there should not be an agreement that gives the name Macedonia to Greece's neighbouring country (Demertzis et al. 1999).

ND's narrative about the existential threat of losing a part of the Greek identity seemed to be shared more efficiently throughout the Greek population. That opinion about not agreeing to name Macedonia the neighbouring country has been developed and securitized in Greece for decades, even with extreme measures such as criminalizing opposing opinions (Armakolas et al. 2019).

Interviewee M (personal communication, 5 July 2019), an experienced politician of ND, argued that ND's narrative was underlying that Macedonia's name is strongly associated with Alexander the Great and his father, who was born and raised in Greece. Aristotle, the known Greek Philosopher, was a teacher of Alexander the Great. Therefore, it is unreasonable to say that Alexander the Great was not Greek. According to Interviewee M, the core problem with the MND's news coverage was that it almost exclusively promoted the securitized narrative regarding the loss of identity, language, and name. This narrative has been passed down from the older to the younger generations, failing to present those narratives from North Macedonia.

A middle ground must be found to see why they passionately claim it. It is wrong, of course, because there is no historical continuity as there is in us, but there is no understanding of why they want to be called that.

Interviewee N (personal communication, 25 April 2019), a respected member of the anti-fascist and Anarchist movement in Greece, highlighted the concerns regarding the extreme polarization in Greek society and the media that has been explored in former studies (Hallin and Mancini 2004). On the one hand, the governmental news media, such as the newspaper *Avgi*, 'deliberately upgraded the role of the fascist elements and the spread of nationalism and patriotism just to appear as the necessary adversary.' On the other hand, the right-wing media did not seem sure about what narrative to promote. There was a division inside ND as the party wanted to be perceived as the 'historical nationalist and patriotic faction' of Greece and maintain its international impact. According to interviewee N, they had to keep the balance despite deciding to use the MND and attract even the extreme right-wing audience.

In conclusion, ND's securitized narrative regarding the MND was linked with the core nationalistic narrative about the MND promoted for years by several powerful state and non-state actors in the Greek public discourse (Heraclides 2019; Loizides 2015, 2020; Veremis 2010; Christopoulos and Karpozilos 2018). The loss of Greekness in Macedonia was perceived as an existential threat through various actions by prominent politicians and figures of Greek society, as well as by some news media (Karyotakis 2022). In addition, such an existential threat justified emergency acts, such as the no-confidence vote against the coalition government. Or the removal of the ND president of the Prefectural Administrative Committees in Thessaloniki, Vasiliki Eftaxa, because she advised the party's local members and officials not to participate in the initiatives and rallies against the Prespes Agreement. Eftaxa was a close associate and a personal choice of Kyriakos Mitsotakis (Karyotakis 2022).

Besides, many people seemed to accept this narrative as they demonstrated against the Prespes Agreement and supported ND and its members on several occasions. Despite ND's success in promoting and securitizing its narrative and being accepted by the public, Syriza's narrative about saving the country with the Prespes Agreement also had a successful securitization. Syriza survived the no-confidence vote (emergency act) initiated by the ND in the middle of June 2018 (Kambas and Papadimas 2018).

Only one parliamentarian of the coalition government, Dimitris Kammenos, voted in favour of the no-confidence action. The result was that the number of governmental parliamentarians was reduced from 154 to 153 out of 300. With three more losses, the government would have lost its majority. At the end of January 2019, the government also successfully ratified the Prespes Agreement despite its coalition partner's (ANEL) decision to leave. Syriza had 145 MPs and needed at least six more to ratify the agreement and secure its majority. Surprisingly, eight parliamentarians from three different parties ratified the agreement and supported the government (Tzogopoulos 2019). Therefore, Syriza's securitized narrative about an existential threat towards Greece seemed to be accepted by most MPs (acceptance of the audience) based on the terms of the Securitization Theory (Buzan et al. 1998).

## Discussion and conclusions

In the case of the recent events of the MND, as it was explained, there were two different narratives and securitization processes about an existential threat promoted mainly by the two most popular parties of Greece. Syriza, the leading party of the coalition government that brought and ratified the Prespes Agreement, argued that the accord is essential for promoting stability and peace in the Balkans. In addition, its securitization narrative aimed to highlight that the accord maintains or even promotes the dominant role of Greece in the Balkan region. Without it, the result would be the further destabilization of the Balkans.

Furthermore, Syriza argued that the Prespes Agreement was also significant for Europe, the USA, and the party itself as it attracted citizens from the left-wing ideology spectrum. Also, except for Turkey, Syriza's narrative claimed that the solution with North Macedonia stopped Russia's influence in the region (Syriza's Account 2012–2019 2020). Russia's and China's influence in the Balkans and North Macedonia has been highlighted in former studies, as it is perceived as a threat to the EU policies and integration process (Davies 2022; Prezelj and Ramsay 2024; Zorić and Stojarová 2023).

The ND narrative was based on the shared patriotic and nationalistic viewpoints that have been spread and securitized in many ways in Greek society for several years (Heraclides 2019; Loizides 2015, 2020; Veremis 2010; Christopoulos and Karpozilos 2018). As a result, ND used an already securitized narrative, which argued that the Greekness of Macedonia must be protected; otherwise, there would be dreadful consequences for the country, even territorial losses by the neighbouring country (Amna.gr 2019a; Kambas and Papadimas 2018; Christopoulos and Karpozilos 2018). Moreover, even after ND won the elections and formed the new government, it was still promoting its securitized narrative through several members despite officially never challenging or questioning the usefulness of the 'Prespes Agreement' (Voultepsi 2020a, 2020b).

ND, compared to Syriza, seemed that its securitization narrative attracted, in the end, the support of many voters, as it helped win the European, local, and national elections (Psaropoulos 2019; In.gr 2019; Georgiou 2019). However, these developments did not result in stopping the ratification of the accord and the fall of the then-government, as several MPs from other parties seemed to be convinced by the securitized narrative supported by Syriza and ratified the agreement (Neoskosmos.com 2019). Subsequently, the results showed a competition between the two securitization narratives, a contentious communication process between the securitized narratives identified in other similar political issues (Lin and Zhao 2016). Consequently, the securitization process can be contentious and successful for more than one actor, as despite Syriza's success, there was a success for the right-wing narrative mainly promoted by ND that resulted in crucial electoral power (Georgiou 2019).

In that contentious securitization process, based on the interviews and the empirical evidence, there were efforts to support a particular ideological knowledge that gave unique credibility to the narratives promoted by the principal officials of the two parties. Furthermore, both contentious securitization narratives aimed to highlight several characteristics of the groups supporting each narrative, such as their political identity. For example, Syriza labelled the 'Prespes Agreement' as a solution that only a left party could realize, and, on the other hand, ND was promoting some core values of the party, such as patriotism. Those supporting the solution were not patriots enough to protect the country and the Greekness of Macedonia. This empowerment process can be considered a part of identity politics, in which the securitization process can be included (Malmvig 2014).

Regarding ST, this study revealed that a securitization process could be contentious and that communicating the existential threat could play an impactful role in spreading the securitized narratives and convincing the public. This new finding enhances the knowledge about ST. In the examined case, the discourse reveals two successful securitization processes and the meaning of an existential threat for the same referent object.

Syriza had the power to convince the parliamentarians to ratify the Prespes Agreement, but after the ratification, the ND seemed to gain more electoral power, resulting in the winning of the elections. Lastly, despite the official support of the two major parties in the Greek political competition, some MPs still exploit the meaning of the existential threat as a communication tool for attracting the electoral power of those individuals that align with their ideological narrative spectrum. These findings aligned with Balzacq's (2005) arguments that explained the importance of power discourse in the securitization process.

To summarize, the study revealed that the securitization process could be contentious, as different actors may promote their different narratives about a topic perceived as an existential threat, and the media might play a significant role in securitizing a narrative. However, as the study was based on interviews with prominent political actors and not journalists and media professionals, future research focusing on that aspect could reveal more insights regarding the role of the media in the securitization process.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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**APPENDIX****Table A1.** The distribution of the interviewees.

Name of Political Party/Group	Gender	Date of the Interview	Place of the Interview
Anarchist (anti-fascist)	Male	23/4/2019	Thessaloniki
Anarchist (anti-fascist)	Male	24/4/2019	Thessaloniki
Anarchist (anti-fascist)	Female	25/4/2019	Thessaloniki
Anarchist (anti-fascist)	Female	3/5/2019	Thessaloniki
Anarchist (anti-fascist)	Female	24/6/2019	Athens
Anarchist (anti-fascist)	Female	25/6/2019	Athens
Anarchist (anti-fascist)	Male	16/7/2019	Thessaloniki
Anarchist (anti-fascist)	Male	26/1/2020	Thessaloniki
Anarchist (anti-fascist)	Male	28/1/2020	Thessaloniki
Anarchist (anti-fascist)	Male	24/2/2020	Thessaloniki
Antarsya	Male	11/2/2020	Thessaloniki
Autonomist (anti-fascist)	Male	2/7/2019	Thessaloniki
Autonomist (anti-fascist)	Male	26/12/2019	Thessaloniki
Autonomist (anti-fascist)	Male	14/1/2020	Thessaloniki
Communist Revolutionary Action (anti-fascist)	Male	1/9/2019	Skype
Ecologists Greens	Female	19/4/2019	Athens
Ecologists Greens	Male	19/4/2019	Athens
Kinima Allagis	Male	24/6/2019	Athens
ND	Male	18/4/2019	Athens
ND	Female	19/4/2019	Athens
ND	Male	19/4/2019	Athens
ND	Male	19/4/2019	Athens
ND	Male	26/6/2019	Athens
ND	Female	5/7/2019	Thessaloniki
ND	Male	20/2/2020	Email
Syriza	Male	18/4/2019	Athens
Syriza	Male	19/4/2019	Athens
Syriza	Female	19/4/2019	Athens
Syriza	Female	19/4/2019	Athens
Syriza	Female	19/4/2019	Athens
Syriza	Male	19/4/2019	Athens
Syriza	Male	19/4/2019	Athens
Syriza	Female	24/6/2019	Athens
Syriza	Female	24/6/2019	Athens
Syriza	Female	24/6/2019	Athens
Syriza	Male	21/2/2020	Thessaloniki
Syriza	Male	25/2/2020	Thessaloniki
Syriza	Male	25/2/2020	Thessaloniki
Syriza	Male	26/2/2020	Thessaloniki
Syriza	Male	27/2/2020	Thessaloniki
Syriza	Male	23/4/2020	Skype
To Potami	Male	25/2/2020	Thessaloniki