

## Europe

### Macedonia Plays Up Past Glory

By MATTHEW BRUNWASSER

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SKOPJE, [MACEDONIA](#) — In the view of many here, the neighbors have been bullying this little Balkan country for a long time.

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Georgi Licovski/European Pressphoto Agency

A 30-ton statue of Alexander the Great in Skopje, Macedonia.

Bulgarians see its people as Bulgarians with accents. Serbia used to consider the land Southern Serbia and refuses to recognize its church. [Greece](#) accuses the country of nothing less than stealing its name, history and national symbols.

This week, Macedonia pushed back.

In a precisely calibrated display of political and civil engineering, workers lifted a 14.5-meter, or 47-foot, bronze statue of Alexander the Great, weighing 30 tons, and placed it on a 15-meter-high pedestal in the central square of Skopje, the capital.

“This is a way for Macedonia to affirm its national existence,” said Vasiliki Neofotistos, an anthropologist from the State University of New York at Buffalo studying identity politics in

Macedonia. “Macedonia wants to advance the thesis that it is a cornerstone of Western civilization.”

This is no mere philosophical dilemma. Macedonia has been stuck in one of the most intractable disputes of the post-communist world: Greece has held international relations hostage for 20 years because it considers the name Macedonia an appropriation of its own Hellenic identity and its northern province of the same name.

If it can't have riches, Macedonia, a country of two million with 31 percent unemployment, wants recognition. Playing up ties to an ancient global celebrity resonates with people who feel they have been marginalized for centuries.

“We are proud of Alexander,” said Petko Bozhinovski, 48, who wore a black T-shirt with the Macedonian flag as the statue was raised Tuesday to the applause of several hundred bystanders.

“Finally, our Alexander has come back to his homeland,” he said.

The project is controversial — it cost €9.4 million, or \$13 million. But some things, say statue fans, are priceless. “If you lose your identity, you are a nobody,” said Alexandar Ristevski, 32, an ethnographer.

Macedonia was promised an invitation to join NATO in 2008, but this was vetoed by Greece because the name issue was unresolved. In 2005, Macedonia also became a candidate for the European Union, but still has no date to start accession talks because of Greek resistance.

“Why should we change our name because of Greece?” said Alex Trajanovski, a retired diplomat, who said Macedonia had been recognized under that name by 135 countries. “No European Union is worth changing the name,” said Zoran Iliev, a border policeman. Greece is equally stubborn. On Tuesday, as the Greek Parliament debated a crucial vote of confidence in the government, Stavros Lambrinidis, the foreign minister, told deputies the statue was a major point of foreign policy, “a provocation” that fanned “irredentism, the greatest threat to the Balkans.”

Mr. Lambrinidis said Greece had proposed a name with a geographical qualifier to settle the dispute. The Macedonian Foreign Ministry declined to comment.

When Macedonia declared independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, Greece immediately protested the name and flag — accusing the new country of staking claims to Greek territory and of trying to separate ancient Macedonian civilization from Hellenic culture.

Athens refused to recognize its northern neighbor and organized an embargo. The two countries signed an interim accord in 1995 under which Macedonia would be referred to internationally as the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. In exchange, Greece lifted its embargo, recognized this provisional name and agreed not to block membership in international institutions.

Almost 16 years later, both sides are still negotiating a new name. They have indicated they might consider a geographical modifier of Macedonia, such as Northern Macedonia — favored by Greece — or Macedonia (Skopje), which the Macedonians like.

Meanwhile, Macedonia has filed suit with the International Court of Justice in The Hague against Greece, accusing it of violating the 1995 agreement. A decision is expected in September.

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*This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:*

***Correction: June 24, 2011***

An earlier version of this article erroneously indicated that Serbia considers Macedonia to be Southern Serbia, but this is no longer the case. Serbia still does not recognize Macedonia's church.

A version of this article appeared in print on June 24, 2011, in The International Herald Tribune with the headline: Macedonia Plays Up Past Glory.