

Special Section: Essays on Nationalism, Conflict and Media

Rethinking Journalism in Territorial Name Disputes Through Multidirectional Memory and a Rights-Centred Approach

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Abstract: Toponyms (territorial names) can mobilize people by shaping captivating nationalist narratives. They can thus be a source of controversial policies that could erode democratic values. Drawing on the study of the Macedonian Name Dispute (MND) over the past six years, the paper argues that journalism must rethink its coverage of these conflicts, as media often amplify domestic nationalist narratives and escalate tensions between nation-states, with measurable effects on bilateral relations and regional diplomacy. I focus here on public communication, as its practices have imposed a dogmatic view that shapes online communication, including social media content, especially in the case of the MND. Crucially, in symbolic name disputes over territories, the media do not merely mirror a pre-existing national interest; they are active agents, since the dispute's political reality is constructed and amplified through communication and cultural practices. In a globalized world, when the media uncritically rally behind national flags, they not only reinforce inequality and restrict people's rights domestically but also harden interstate positions, complicate diplomacy, and undermine multilateral conflict-resolution mechanisms. This essay argues for a normative approach to media coverage, focusing on facts, pluralism, and more inclusive perspectives in coverage of territorial name disputes. This normative approach draws on Rothberg's notion of multidirectional memory to encourage reporting that recognizes overlapping memories and comparative claims rather than treating histories as exclusive competitions.

Keywords: journalism, Macedonia, nationalism, rights-centred approach, territorial name disputes, toponyms

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Toponyms (territorial names) are far more than neutral cartographic conveniences; they are political instruments that carry histories, identities, and claims. A place-name can condense centuries of migration, conquest, myth, and memory into a single word that resonates emotionally and symbolically across societies. Because names operate at the intersection of language, law, and identity, they possess a unique capacity to mobilize publics: they can be invoked to rally support, to delegitimize rivals, and to naturalize territorial claims. When a toponym becomes the object of contestation between nation-states, the dispute is rarely about semantics alone. It becomes a stage on which different countries' competing visions of the past and of a polity's future are performed and fought over (Berg & Vuolteenaho, 2016; Bukh, 2020; Kadmon, 2004).

Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory reframes public remembrance as comparative and mutually illuminating rather than strictly competitive. For journalism, this means reporters can present contested histories in a detailed and layered manner, instead of applying zero-sum framings that harden national antagonisms (Rothberg, 2009). Name disputes are primarily symbolic: their political salience is produced and sustained through discourse and media circulation. News organizations do not merely report disputes; they frame them (Bartholomé et al., 2015; Goffman, 1974; Tuchman, 1978). Choices about headlines, photographs, expert sources, and the repetition of particular phrases shape how audiences perceive the stakes and the actors involved. Consequently, national media are not merely reflecting an objective national interest; they participate in creating and stabilizing the very content of that interest by selecting frames, metaphors, and authoritative voices that make certain claims appear natural, urgent, or existential (Karyotakis, 2025a).

The Macedonian Name Dispute (MND) offers a vivid case study (Kadmon, 2004) of how a toponym can become a political fulcrum. Importantly, the dispute is primarily a symbolic contest over identity, historical memory, and cultural ownership rather than a dispute about the physical location of international borders. What began as a diplomatic disagreement over nomenclature evolved into a long-running contest that shaped electoral politics, foreign policy, cultural production, and everyday social relations in both Greece and the state now known as North Macedonia. The name at stake functioned simultaneously as a symbol of historical continuity for some and as an appropriation or threat for others (Heraclides, 2019; Nimetz, 2020; Ellinas, 2010).

There are similar cases around the world that share characteristics with the Macedonian dispute (e.g., the Arabian/Persian Gulf, the Kuril Islands/Northern Territories, the South China Sea, the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands). Some are more violent than others, such as the conflict over Cyprus, where competing names and narratives accompany a material occupation and contested sovereignty; this differs from the Macedonian Name Dispute's (MND's) primarily symbolic character (Kadmon, 2004).

The dispute also reshaped foreign-policy calculations and bilateral relations (Heraclides, 2019; Nimetz, 2020), demonstrating how toponymic controversies can have direct consequences for international diplomacy and regional stability. This essay draws on a long-term study of the Macedonian Name Dispute to identify the mechanisms by which media coverage has amplified nationalist claims, and it proposes a greater emphasis on a rights-centred perspective to guide journalists who wish to report responsibly on toponymic disputes.

Why names matter: law, memory, and rights

The study of place-names (toponyms) shows that names encode historical claims, linguistic heritage, and power relations; renaming or contesting a name is often a deliberate political act intended to reconfigure authority and belonging (Berg & Vuolteenaho, 2016; Karyotakis, 2025a; Short & Dubots, 2022). This means that media choices about which name to use are not neutral editorial preferences but interventions with legal and social consequences. Applying multidirectional memory to toponymy can generate practical reporting methods with the potential to defuse conflicts over names. Such practices would juxtapose competing historical claims with parallel narratives of suffering, migration, and cultural exchange; include minority and diasporic voices that reveal cross-border continuities; and explain legal instruments that mediate these memories. Such reporting shifts the story from “whose past is true” to “how multiple pasts shape present rights and governance,” strengthening a rights-centred focus (Rothberg, 2009; Summers, 2023).

A rights-based perspective based on multidirectional memory reframes the dispute. Rather than treating a name contest as a symbolic quarrel between rival national myths, a rights approach asks: *whose political voice is recognized? Which communities gain or lose access to cultural and political goods because of naming practices?* International law places the right of peoples to self-determination at the core of state formation and minority protection (Jones, 2021; Summers, 2023), embedding naming disputes within broader questions about political status, cultural development, and participation. Reporting that ignores these legal dimensions risks reducing complex claims about governance and identity to mere rhetoric.

Memory is multidirectional, not zero-sum. Rothberg’s concept of multidirectional memory (2009) challenges the assumption that public remembrance is a finite resource: one group’s memory need does not erase another’s; memories can be productive, comparative, and mutually illuminating. Applied to toponymic (territorial name) disputes, this insight suggests that journalists and scholars should avoid framing history as an exclusive competition (one people’s “true” past versus another’s “fabrication”). Instead, reporting can highlight how different communities draw on overlapping historical repertoires—ancient symbols, migration narratives, and shared cultural practices—to make contemporary claims, and how those repertoires can be negotiated rather than weaponized.

Combining legal literacy with multidirectional memory yields concrete practices: explain the legal status of names and treaties; foreground how naming affects concrete rights (education, language use, property), political power, ambitions, and the seizure of natural resources, such as petroleum and gas. In addition, it includes diasporic and minority voices and presents historical claims as layered and contestable rather than mutually exclusive. Such an approach protects pluralism, reduces the moral panic surrounding exclusive national narratives, and reframes disputes as matters of rights and governance rather than merely symbolic honour (Berg & Vuolteenaho, 2016; Jones, 2021; Karyotakis, 2025a; Rothberg, 2009; Short & Dubots, 2022; Summers, 2023).

Emphasizing rights and multidirectional memory is likely to be politically contested; governments and nationalist actors may accuse the media of bias. Still, the alternative – uncritical repetition of exclusionary frames – tends to harden divisions and erode democratic protections. Adopting a rights- and memory-informed practice is therefore both ethically defensible and pragmatically necessary (Jones, 2021; Rothberg, 2009; Summers, 2023).

How the media fuel nationalism and dogmatic views

The modern Macedonian geographical area is significant not only for its important financial and political position but also for fostering a remarkable, albeit fictional, history linked to the lineage of Alexander the Great. This heritage is vital for establishing and preserving Greek national pride and identity. The residents of North Macedonia viewed Alexander the Great as an emblem for developing their nationalistic narrative aimed at creating and safeguarding their distinct national identity (Heraclides, 2019). Both sides lay exclusive claim to Alexander the Great as “theirs” and to the geographic origin of his birth. The Prespa Agreement became effective on 12 February 2019 between Greece (government led by the political party of Syriza) and the then Republic of Macedonia (government led by the political party of Social Democratic Union) and clarified among others that citizens of North Macedonia are not related to the Hellenic civilization connected to Alexander the Great, raising questions about why memory cannot be multidirectional, given that more than one country claims a connection to the Macedonian legacy. For example, in the cases of Genghis Khan or Simón Bolívar, more than one country claims a connection to each hero’s legacy with no objections from other claimants. They are content with a non-exclusive right to memory.

In the Macedonian Name Dispute (MND), most Greek online and offline news media often reproduced the binary logic of the dispute: one side’s historical claim versus the other’s denial (Karyotakis, 2025a). Similarly, in North Macedonia, especially under the leadership of Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski (2006-2016), there was intense pressure on the news media to promote extreme nationalist views that further alienated common ground between the two countries (Petkovski, 2016; Heraclides,

2019). In many instances, news reporting in Greece and North Macedonia followed the lead of nationalist elites, echoing their language and priorities rather than interrogating them (Ellinas, 2010; Karyotakis, 2022; Petkovski, 2016; Heraclides, 2019).

This pattern is not unique. It is a recurring feature of how the media handle territorial name disputes more broadly. Based on the nationalistic education that is the norm throughout the modern world, media would transmit the message that two individuals from hostile nations (e.g., Turkey and Greece) would not be able to find anything in common and live peacefully. In such approaches to nationalism, international relations are always a competition about lost lands, victimhood, and bloodline claims. The consequences of such coverage are consequential. When news media uncritically adopt nationalist framings, such as in the case of Greece and North Macedonia, they do more than inform—they legitimize exclusionary narratives and normalize antagonism. Repeated exposure to reductive frames could harden public opinion, narrow the space for compromise, and make diplomatic solutions politically costly. Moreover, media amplification of nationalist rhetoric can erode democratic norms by privileging majoritarian sentiments over minority rights, valorising homogeneous national identities at the expense of pluralism, and stigmatizing dissenting voices as disloyal or unpatriotic (Ginosar, 2015; Karyotakis, 2022), and should not be confused with patriotic journalism, which does not follow nationalistic narratives blindly (Ginosar & Cohen, 2019). In short, the way journalists and the media choose to cover toponymic disputes can either inflame divisions or help manage them responsibly.

In Greece, the delegitimizing treatment of the neighbouring state's name appears across specific outlets and genres rather than uniformly across "the media." Public and commercial newsrooms sometimes require that wire copy using the agreed name be reframed for domestic audiences; broadsheet headlines and tabloid captions may substitute metonyms (e.g., "Skopje" and "FYROM") or append qualifiers and scare quotes, while opinion pages amplify nationalist frames. One notable example was the censorship of a message from the former UK Prime Minister Theresa May, who called to congratulate the Greek Prime Minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, on his 2019 electoral success and expressed appreciation for his commitment to implementing the Prespa Agreement. In its press release, the Athens-Macedonian News Agency (AMNA), Greece's state news agency, omitted any mention of her statement regarding the Prespa Agreement, as it clearly conflicted with the new government's positions during the 2019 electoral campaign (Karyotakis, 2025a). In addition, it is worth noting that opinions supporting a solution that included the name "Macedonia" in the relationship between the two countries were criminalized in Greece in the 1990s. As a result, even online debate in the country tends to lean against granting the name to Greece's neighbouring country and to support far-right views (for more examples, see Ellinas, 2010; Karyotakis, 2025b).

These editorial practices are shaped by ownership structures, political ties, and commercial incentives, and they delegitimize the name by repeatedly signalling that it

lacks legitimacy (Karyotakis, 2025a). North Macedonian outlets, in turn, often foreground legal recognition and international usage, and some party-aligned outlets mobilize identity narratives to counter perceived Greek delegitimization, promoting a different identity (Traikova Strezovska, 2021). Furthermore, public broadcasters in both countries are particularly consequential because they set the tone for prime-time news and are often perceived as carrying official positions with the governments in both countries, thereby having a strong say in what is reported. Also, in the examined case, the governments played a strong role in policing the national narrative, affecting even the online discourse (Heraclides, 2019; Karyotakis, 2025a; 2025b; Petkovski, 2016).

An important theoretical implication follows: in symbolic naming disputes, the media are not passive transmitters of an independently existing national interest but co-producers of it. The coverage of a toponymic (territorial name) dispute helps constitute the stakes themselves—by amplifying particular historical narratives, ritual performances, and moral vocabularies that transform a name into a public emergency, meaning that the role of the news media is essential in challenging or supporting such narratives (Karyotakis, 2025a).

This reality makes an urgent rethink of journalism practices necessary. If journalism aspires to uphold rights-centred and democratic values—respect for human dignity, pluralism, and the protection of rights—then reporting on territorial name disputes must move beyond uncritical alignment with national flags. A rights-centred approach does not entail erasing national attachments; instead, it requires contextualizing those attachments within broader legal, historical, and human rights frameworks, and it demands that media amplify a plurality of voices, including those marginalized by dominant narratives, to understand the world and expand our horizons (Dahlgren, 2013). Such reporting recognizes that names are contested precisely because they matter to people's sense of belonging and political agency; it therefore treats naming and territorial disputes as matters of public consequence that implicate rights, not merely as symbolic squabbles. However, that approach should also be supported by the highly concentrated Greek media landscape, in which a few business owners, dominate online and offline news media. In the Greek case, these owners tend to restrict critical voices, underplay the role of investigative reporting, and have strong clientelist connections with particular politicians and political parties to report news in ways that support their personal ambitions (Papaathanassopoulos et al., 2021).

In an era of resurgent ethno-nationalism, shrinking multilateralism, and intensified border politics, the reflexive media rallying behind national narratives risks deepening global fragmentation. Conversely, a more reflective, rights-oriented journalism can help preserve democratic pluralism and protect the dignity of those whose identities are contested. The Macedonian case and other similar disputes, thus serve as both a cautionary tale and a laboratory: they show how powerful and durable the effects of naming controversies can be, and they offer lessons about how media might report such controversies in ways that reduce harm and expand the space for peaceful, rights-respecting solutions (Heraclides, 2019; Karyotakis, 2025a; Nimetz,

2020). Subsequent academic and policy analyses documented that the Prespes (or Prespa) Agreement of 2019, which gave the name North Macedonia to Greece's neighbouring country, had legal and cultural implications that required sustained follow-up beyond the initial headlines (Armakolas et al., 2019).

A recurrent problem was that international reporting could sometimes echo domestic nationalist frames rather than interrogate them. In contexts where national media were highly partisan or where political elites mobilized emotive historical claims, foreign outlets—especially those relying on local stringers or translated dispatches—could reproduce polarized language and symbolic imagery without sufficient contextualization (Karafotia, 2023; Kretsos & Kaimaki, 2023). This dynamic, in the Macedonian Name Dispute, was compounded online, where disinformation and emotionally charged content spread rapidly, complicating fact-based reporting (Kretsos & Kaimaki, 2023).

Another pattern is episodic attention: flare-ups—such as political leaders reverting to contested names or provocative public ceremonies—receive intense coverage, but the reporting often treats these episodes as isolated incidents rather than symptoms of deeper social tensions. By 'deeper social tensions' I refer to structural and long-term cleavages that the name dispute both expresses and obscures: competing historical narratives and memory politics; minority recognition and language rights; party competition and elite legitimation; educational curricula and identity formation; and economic anxieties that political entrepreneurs can link to symbolic threats. Media episodic coverage of protests or diplomatic rows often treats these episodes as isolated events rather than as manifestations of these underlying cleavages, supporting even the media owners' ambitions, at least in the cases of Greece and North Macedonia, where there is strong clientelism (Papathanassopoulos et al., 2021; Tuneva, 2021). Furthermore, online debates, at least in the Macedonian case, seem to support a nationalistic dogmatic view that rejects compromise within both countries and the use of the name "Macedonia" (Karyotakis, 2025a).

As a result, the lived-rights dimension—how naming affects language policy, education, minority recognition, and everyday identity—remains underreported, even though these are the areas in which naming disputes have tangible consequences for citizens (Karafotia, 2023; Kretsos & Kaimaki, 2023). Recent incidents—such as political figures publicly using contested names—have reignited media attention and diplomatic friction, demonstrating how fragile the settlement can be and how media amplification can quickly escalate tensions (Papadimitriou, 2024; Wintour, 2025).

Territorial name (toponymic) disputes shape bilateral trust, influence treaty negotiations, and can either facilitate or obstruct regional cooperation and multilateral institutions. Responsible coverage of territorial name disputes requires a rights-centered, multidirectional memory journalism that protects minority rights at home and reduces interstate friction abroad.

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