

## DOCTORAL THESIS

# Power Relations and Territorial Name Disputes: The Securitization Process as a Media and Political Tool in Greece

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## **Abstract**

Place names have the power to mobilize people by shaping seductive nationalistic narratives. They can thus be a resource for contentious and identity politics. This dissertation uses ideas from Semiotics, according to which a sign (a name of a territory) can obtain meanings that do not necessarily align with empirical reality and, therefore, can be used to serve a fabricated truth and a seemingly improved version of reality (hyperreality). Building on the framework of “injustice symbols”, this study proposes a new concept named “symbolic name dispute” (SND) to explain the contentious politics of using different names for referring to a given territory. Symbolic name disputes can focus on a particular geographical region, be only loosely connected to, or even totally disconnected from, actual territorial claims: opposing groups fight over the name without contesting existing geographical borders. These disputes can feature in populist politics and involve complex media tactics (e.g., disinformation, hate campaigns, and censorship).

The leading example of the dissertation, the Macedonian Name Dispute (MND), one of the oldest name disputes globally, is currently unattached to any actual territorial claims but nevertheless carries enormous symbolic power. It is linked with the Macedonian Question, which has influenced the region’s politics for around 150 years. In the last almost 30 years, the dispute has been simmering between two countries,

Greece and the country that is now named North Macedonia, over the right to use the name “Macedonia.” The dispute plays a prominent role in Greece’s relations with the European Union and other powerful countries. The dispute was supposed to be resolved with the ratification of the Prespes Agreement in 2019, but the agreement provoked massive protests, attacks on individuals and interference in domestic politics by other countries, and contributed to the fall of Greece’s radical-left government.

The dissertation uses the MND as a case study to explain how disputes over place names are used as a political and media resource. The study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), framing analysis, and interviews with key informants, including staff members of the Greek Parliament, members of political parties, and key anti-fascist activists. Applying Securitization Theory, the study explains how disputants turn a “soft” factor such as identity into a “hard” factor through hate, the fear of existential threat, performed/manufactured victimhood, and the tactic of scapegoating corrupt media and promoting anti-media sentiment. The study contributes to communication studies’ and other fields’ understanding of populist tactics that are resulting in an unprecedented degree of democratic backsliding worldwide.

*Keywords:* Macedonian Name Dispute, Nationalism, Securitization Theory,  
Power Relations, Territorial Name Disputes, Semiotics