
FLIGHTS BETWEEN GREECE AND MACEDONIA RESUME AFTER 12-YEAR BLOCKADE

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After more than a decade of being stubbornly unlinked in the skies, Greece and Macedonia are to put Europes last aviation blockade behind them.

At 6.40pm on Thursday the first direct flight to Skopje, the Macedonian capital, will take off from Athens international airport. Officials are calling it a historic moment for bilateral ties between the countries, which have moved to end their dispute over the former Yugoslav republics name.

This is indicative of the big improvement in our relations, Macedonias ambassador to Athens, Darko Angelov, told the Guardian. As neighbouring countries it was long needed and will be greatly welcomed by the business community.

Greeces largest carrier, Aegean Airlines, will operate return flights twice weekly.

Macedonias deputy prime minister, Bujar Osmani, will be on the 48-seat Olympic Air ATR42 turboprop plane for the first flight.

The air link was suspended in 2006 when Skopjes former rightwing government chose to name the capitals airport after Alexander the Great.

Greece saw the step as appropriation of its historical legacy, arguing it amounted to further proof of landlocked Macedonias intent to lay claim to the adjacent Greek province of Macedonia, including the port city of Thessaloniki.

Under a landmark deal reached between the two nations in June, the Macedonian prime minister, Zoran Zaevs social democrat government agreed to rename the country North Macedonia in a bid to placate fears about its ambitions. Any mention of Alexander was also removed from public infrastructure, with the airport being renamed Skopje international airport.

Passage of the accord has been set as a condition for Macedonia joining Nato and ultimately the EU.

In a dramatic vote, Zaev managed to muster the two-thirds majority needed to make the requisite constitutional changes last month after opposition MPs in the 120-seat parliament agreed to endorse the controversial agreement.

The lawmakers, almost all members of the nationalist VMRO party, have since been placed under armed guard because of security fears. There have been protests accusing them of betrayal.

A second batch of constitutional changes will be brought before Macedonian lawmakers in the coming days.

Speaking to reporters in Skopje ahead of his visit, Osmani described Greece as a new strategic partner, saying support for the name change was growing despite outrage among hardliners.

The treaty must be ratified by the end of the year before the Greek parliament is also called to pass it.

Dispelling criticism from nationalists in Greece – including his junior partner in government – the prime minister, Alexis Tsipras, says he is also determined to pass the accord, now viewed as a rare foreign policy success.

Earlier this month, Greeces alternate minister for foreign affairs described resumption of the direct route as a very positive development that would further boost economic cooperation between the two states.

Prior to the flights inauguration, travellers had been forced to endure an eight-hour car ride from Athens to Skopje or take connecting flights via Istanbul or Vienna. We are delighted, said Branko Geroski, a political commentator in Skopje. It will open up a lot of opportunities for travel. Athens itself is a very desirable destination. This is great news and lets hope the price [of an air ticket] is good too.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/01/flights-between-greece-and-macedonia-resume-after-12-year-blockade>

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