

Macedonia: What's in a name?

The Balkan nation wants change, **CHRIS JOHNSON** writes

Macedonians living in Australia are eager for the Rudd Government to use them in advancing bilateral relations, saying there is much the two countries can offer each other.

But what they would really like is for Australia to call the nation by its real name.

Washington-based president of the self-proclaimed United Macedonian Diaspora, Metodija Koloski, who stopped off in Canberra as part of his current Pacific speaking tour, said being referred to as the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia was not acceptable to his countrymen.

"We want Australia to recognise the Republic of Macedonia by its constitutional name, as have many other nations around the world," he said.

"And using the acronym FYROM is offensive to us.

"Macedonians have been immigrating to Australia over the past hundred years and have been an integral part of the cultural mosaic of Australian society."

Koloski insists his group was instrumental in pushing the Macedonian Government to get rid of visas for Australian citizens visiting his country, which was agreed to in 2008.

"And we hope that, vice versa, Australia will one day have a visa waiver program for Macedonians. Right now it's only one way," he said.

Koloski said relations between Australia and Macedonia were highly positive, but more could be done to progress them.

The Australian Government agrees the relationship is healthy, but there appears to be no movement on recognising the name.

A Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade spokeswoman said Australia had "warm and productive relations with the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" and that those relations had been further strengthened in recent times by a number of high-level meetings.

"Prime Minister [Nikola] Gruevski and Foreign Minister [Antonio] Milososki made a successful visit to Australia from the 25th to the 27th of October, 2009, as guests of the Australian Government," she said.

"The visit resulted in the conclusion of a social security agreement, which will benefit citizens from both countries."

Speaker of Australia's House of Representatives, Harry Jenkins, was warmly received on his visit to Macedonia in December, during which he addressed the country's national parliament.

And Foreign Minister Stephen Smith met Milososki again at the London Conference on Afghanistan held in January.

"Australia also has a well received direct aid program, which has delivered approximately \$17,500 in



child welfare and environmental projects over the past five years," the spokeswoman said.

Koloski said that while personal relations were good between the Macedonian and Greek communities in Australia, he believed Greek hardliners had lobbied the Government to limit its recognition of his country.

Greece and Macedonia continue to argue over the name, with Greece insisting that the term Republic of Macedonia implies territorial aspirations to northern parts of Greece.

For its part, the Greek diaspora in Australia claim Macedonia is "casting its dark veil of propaganda over the masses in campaigns of outright malevolence against the integrity and importance of Hellenic history in southern Europe.

"For the sake of their own survival in the Balkan region, they deliberately mislead and misinform their own people on historical matters."

That's how one of the Hellenic representative groups described the dispute when congratulating South Australian Premier Mike Rann last week after a video of his November address to a Greek festival came to light.

Rann inflamed tensions and sparked a diplomatic incident by suggesting that Macedonian President Gjorge Ivanov was dangerously stirring up trouble and trying to "steal Greek history and culture".

The Macedonian Embassy in Canberra expressed outrage.

Yesterday, the ambassador, Pero Stojanovski, told *The Canberra Times* that "The Macedonian Embassy in Canberra is not pleased with the abusive comments made by the South Australian Premier Mike Rann and sent a formal protest to the Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Minister Smith and seek

formal explanation and apology with regards to the comment.

"Three months ago the Macedonian Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski paid an official visit to Australia where the two prime ministers committed to furthering bilateral relationship.

"Thus we trust that this comment does not represent the official view of the Australian Government towards Macedonia and we look forward for the official response by the Australian Government and Mr Rudd."

Koloski also expressed outrage, but he insists that while his diaspora group worked closely with the embassy, it did not interfere with internal or government-to-government matters.

The ambassador said Koloski's visit to Australia has been most worthwhile.

"Every opportunity for exchanging and sharing experiences, visions and attitudes is productive and it means synergy," he said.

"UMD is an NGO [non-government organisation] and it is their democratic right to form this kind of organisation."

Stojanovski acknowledged that no progress had been made in getting the Australian Government to recognise Macedonia by its constitutional name.

"But we hope that Australia will follow the example of USA, Canada, Russia and many other countries," the ambassador said.

Director of Australian operations of the UMD, Ordan Andreevski, said parliamentary and cultural groups in Australia and Macedonia had been working on a road map to advance the bilateral relationship.

"We can help each other on issues such as climate change, advancing trade relations and boosting cultural links," he said.



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Wanting recognition: United Macedonian Diaspora president, Metodija Koloski, and Director of Australian Operations, Ordan Andreevski. Photo: MARINA NEIL

"We are supportive of Australia's bid to gain a seat on the United Nations Security Council.

"We would like to see more investment in projects and things like scholarships for students.

"One of the under utilised assets of Australia is the social networks of the diasporas."

DFAT insists the Australian Government values greatly the contributions of the many communities that make up Australia's multicultural society, and regularly engages with specific groups on a wide range of issues.

"The interest and activities of these communities and groups always support and enhance the bilateral relationship," the spokeswoman said.

Koloski met with a number of members of parliament and senators while in Canberra last week and also held talks with DFAT officials.

He pleaded his case during speeches in parliamentary committee rooms and at the Australian Institute of International Affairs.

His tour has taken him to state capitals and regional centres.

Tonight Harry Jenkins, along with fellow Labor MPs Brendan O'Connor and Bill Shorten, will be among guests at a gala banquet in Melbourne, hosted by the Macedonians and attended by their ambassador and Koloski.

Next week Koloski flies to New Zealand before returning to Australia to visit Brisbane and Perth.

The 2006 Census recorded 83,978 Macedonians living in Australia.

Chris Johnson is a staff reporter.