

## **2.2. Republic of Macedonia in the process of accession into the European Union**

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### **Introduction**

Since independence in 1991, Republic of Macedonia is attempting to become part of the family where it belongs geographically. It is so because Republic of Macedonia is surrounded by neighbors with whom the country shares the history, the reality and the European future. Hence, the desire to join the European Union comes from the idea to always be a constructive and relevant part of the big family.

In this context, the Macedonian citizens are firmly convinced that the place and the future of Republic of Macedonia is the big family of European nations, hand in hand with all the nations that comprise the European Union. As shown in the public opinion survey conducted by the Institute for Democracy, Solidarity and Civil Society for the needs of the Secretariat for European Affairs in April 2006 (Stojmenovski, 2010: 5), as well as in subsequent researches, about 83% of the citizens support Macedonia's entry into the European Union. The same is reflected by the surveys conducted by IRI, SEA and IDSCS, eloquently pointing to the same trend, which till date has been consistently high and it ranges between 83% and 97%<sup>1</sup>. This clearly shows that Republic of Macedonia places highest priority to the Euro-integration process regardless of the other problems that the country is facing<sup>2</sup>.

### **Sequence of major events in the process of EU accession**

Through a historical vivisection, this determination can be clearly seen through the following events which marked the path of the Republic of Macedonia to join the European family. Namely, with the proclamation of the independence in January 1991, as well as with the positive conclusion regarding the independence by the Arbitration Commission of the

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<sup>1</sup> depending on the agency that conducted the survey and the methodology used.

<sup>2</sup> As appropriate review of the researches and opinions regarding the level of support, the European Commission in Republic of Macedonia conducts the Eurobarometer survey twice a year.

European Union at the beginning of 1992, Republic of Macedonia has set the goal of becoming a member of the European Union as one of its strategic objectives. For this purpose, in October 1992 in Brussels, at the EU headquarters, Republic of Macedonia has appointed a representative, while full diplomatic relations with the European Union were established on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of December 1995 when the Republic of Macedonia Mission in the EU was opened. With this, the European Union has initiated the negotiations with the Republic of Macedonia in order to conclude an agreement with a wide range of cooperation in trade, financial operations and transportation<sup>3</sup>. Two years later, in 1997, the European Union established a permanent office of the European Commission in the Republic of Macedonia, which in March 2000 was raised at the level of a Delegation of the European Commission.

In order to implement the reforms necessary for accession and EU membership, on March 10<sup>th</sup> 1996, Republic of Macedonia became one of the countries that have gained the right to use the FARE (Phare) program, created by the European Union to support the reform i.e. providing support to the transformation of the political and economic systems of the countries in Central and Eastern Europe towards the EU accession.

Keeping this course of accession to the European Union, in February 1998, in Ohrid, the first political dialogue between Republic of Macedonia and the European Union took place. The same month, with a unanimous decision, the Parliament of Republic of Macedonia adopted the Declaration for development of the relations between Republic of Macedonia and the European Union, stating that the "EU membership is a strategic goal of the same" (Secretariat for European Affairs, 2006: 11), concurrently requesting the engagement of all capacities in order to achieve that goal. Accordingly, on the 21st and 22<sup>nd</sup> of March 1998 in Skopje, the first meeting of the Council for Cooperation between Republic of Macedonia and the European Union was held. This Cooperation Council was set up as a body responsible for monitoring the implementation of the Cooperation Agreement, the achievements and the developments in the structural reforms, and the same successfully operated until the establishment of the new bodies with the Stabilization and Association Agreement.

With the introduction of the coined phrase "Western Balkans", in May 1999, the European Commission established a framework for cooperation between the European Union

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<sup>3</sup> In June 1996 in Brussels, the Republic of Macedonia and the European Community signed the Cooperation Agreement as well as a Treaty in the field of transportation, followed by textiles, which came into force in January 1998 after the Parliament of the Republic of Macedonia ratified and the EU Council accepted the same.

and countries of the so-called "Western Balkans"<sup>4</sup>. In other words, within the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe, the European Union proposed a new designed form of gradual integration in the EU - Stabilization and Association Agreement<sup>5</sup>. In this line of action, and with faster tempo than before, in June of that year, i.e. on the 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> of June, the European Commission in its Feasibility Report concluded that Republic of Macedonia is ready to start negotiations for signing a Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA). Hence, the Council of EU Ministers invited the Commission to present formal recommendations for negotiating directives to the SAA with Republic of Macedonia, which were adopted on the 08<sup>th</sup> of September 1999. Consequently, the Council mandated the Commission to start the negotiations. This prompted the raising of the level of cooperation between Republic of Macedonia and the European Union, and the formal launch of the negotiations for a potential membership in the European Union.

In the attempt to create a favorable climate full with optimism in terms of the enlargement of the Union, in June 2000, in Feira, Portugal, the European Council took a stand that all countries involved in the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP), are potential candidates for membership in the European Union. Hence, in autumn of that year, at the margin of the Zagreb Summit, the Foreign Affairs Council of the European Union adopted the Regulation which introduced preferential trade relations with the countries participating in the Stabilization and Association Process.

A positive benefit resulting from the before mentioned is the fact that on 09 April 2001 in Luxembourg, Republic of Macedonia became the first country, out of all SAP participating countries, to sign the Stabilization and Association Agreement. The Parliament of the Republic of Macedonia, by acclamation, on April 12, 2001 ratified the Agreement and on 01 June 2001, the Interim Agreement on trade and trade-related matters between the Republic of Macedonia and the European Union was enforced. Shortly after, on April 04, 2002, Republic of Macedonia has received the first annual report by the European Commission in respect to the Stabilization and Association Agreement, which was of particular significance because it came immediately after the war conflict in 2001.

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<sup>4</sup> Republic of Macedonia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro and Croatia.

<sup>5</sup> The essence of this approach in the Process of Stabilization and Association (SAP) in the European Union is to offer the countries of the so-called Western Balkans a closer cooperation with the European Union - by concluding associative agreements similar to the Europe treaties, which were concluded with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

In line with the commitments of the European Union to speed up the process of Macedonia's EU integration, on the 20<sup>th</sup> of June, 2003, the leaders of the member countries adopted the "Thessaloniki Agenda for the Western Balkans", which confirmed the European perspective of the countries in the region. This document has set the instruments of accession in the process of stabilization and association.

With this, Macedonia's wish for its European dream to turn into a reality became visibly clearer and more precise. For this purpose, in February 2004, the Macedonian Parliament adopted the "Declaration for submission of application for membership in the European Union" and it was foreseen to submit the application for membership on the 26<sup>th</sup> of February 2004. But on that same day, the President of the Republic of Macedonia, Boris Trajkovski tragically lost his life in a plane crash. Consequently, the submission of the application for EU membership was postponed for a later date - March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2004. In Dublin, Republic of Ireland, the Government of Republic of Macedonia submitted the application demonstrating the strategic commitment to be part of the European Union, and the willingness to take responsibility for the same. With this act, Republic of Macedonia has formally confirmed the previous clear political commitments for membership in the European Union.

With the objective to sooner join the big family, on the 06<sup>th</sup> of September 2004, the Government of the Republic of Macedonia has adopted the National Strategy for European Integration, while a month later, on the 01<sup>st</sup> of October 2004, the President of the European Commission - Romano Prodi submitted the Questionnaire<sup>6</sup> to the Government of Republic of Macedonia. After a four-month work on the questionnaire, answering around 3000 questions, on January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2005, the Government of Republic of Macedonia completed the Questionnaire for the needs of drafting the opinion of the European Commission on the application of the Republic of Macedonia for EU membership. On February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2005 in Brussels, the Delegation of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia submitted the responses to the Questionnaire comprised of 14,000 pages to the European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso.

After the carefully and thoroughly conducted analysis measuring the progress achieved by the Republic of Macedonia, the European Commission on November 09

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<sup>6</sup> It is a tool created by the European Commission through which data is collected about the level of preparedness of the country for membership in the European Union and for the start of the negotiations for the EU membership, which is practically scanning the overall performance of the applicant country.

announced its Opinion on the application of the Republic of Macedonia for EU membership, and has unanimously decided to recommend the European Union to grant the Republic of Macedonia a status of candidate country for EU membership, as recognition of the great achievements in the legislative framework related to the Ohrid Framework Agreement of 2001 and for the progress made in the four-year implementation of the Stabilization and Association Agreement. With this, at the Summit in Brussels which took place on the 17<sup>th</sup> of December 2005, the European Council welcomed the Opinion of the Commission on the application of the Republic of Macedonia for EU membership and the significant progress achieved by the Republic of Macedonia towards meeting the political criteria set by the European Council in Copenhagen in 1993 and the requirements of the Stabilization and Association Process set by the Council in 1997, and decided to grant Republic of Macedonia the status of a candidate country for EU membership. With this achievement, Republic of Macedonia joined Turkey and Croatia.

After this benchmark, the activities in the process of joining the European Union had a continuous tempo, setting the attention at the next target of starting negotiations for membership in the European Union. In the meantime, the Republic of Macedonia became the first country in the region whose projects were approved by the European Commission and the first country in the region to sign a financial agreement which allowed for the use of IPA funds. Also, one of the positive signs that come as an encouragement boost from the European Union was also the agreement on the visa liberation and the readmission agreement. To confirm the latter, the visa liberalization dialogue was launched in February 2008<sup>7</sup>.

One month later, the European Commission has adopted the Report on the countries from the Western Balkans which defines the benchmarks for moving forward into the next stage of the accession process. As a result of the Report, on 14<sup>th</sup> of October 2009, in accordance with the progress made by the Republic of Macedonia in reference to the process of compliance with the Stabilization and Association Agreement, the progress in meeting the political criteria, the process of compliance with the European legislation and the progress in all areas covered in the dialogue on the visa liberalization - the European Commission

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<sup>7</sup> According to the country's progress in the area of justice, freedom and security and the fulfillment of the benchmarks within the dialogue on visa liberalization, on the 19<sup>th</sup> of December 2009, the visa regime for Macedonia was canceled.

recommended start of negotiations for full membership of the Republic of Macedonia to the European Union.

In December 2010, the EU Council has confirmed the assessment of the European Commission that Republic of Macedonia sufficiently fulfills i.e. meets the political criteria and noted that the European Commission re-affirms its recommendation for start of the accession negotiations with Republic of Macedonia. The same happened in 2011, as well as with the latest report by the European Commission dated 10.10.2012. (SEC, 2012: 1).

## **Conclusion**

Republic of Macedonia is still waiting for a date for negotiations. And while waiting, what is requested from Republic of Macedonia is to be even more agile and to work on achieving the reforms set as a condition by the European Union. This means to fully and completely meet the political criteria set by the European Council in Copenhagen in 1993 including the requirements of the Stabilization and Association Process set by the Council of Europe in 1997. The same would mean to extensively change the attitude of the Macedonian actors, which basically would amount to accepting the already offered by the other side, in order to avoid in a rather infantile manner the obligations which the integration process is necessarily imposing. That is why one should abandon such a relationship towards Europe, characterized by two I's and two E's - inertia, improvisation, elections, excuse ... The task demands replacement of the current one with a new policy of 3 S's: self-initiative, strategy and seriousness (Taskovska 2004: 137-138).

This is because the integration of Republic of Macedonia into the European Union is a process that should facilitate the reforms in the economic and political system, including the legal system in accordance with the principles, the objectives and the legislation of the European Union. All these reforms have the purpose to make Republic of Macedonia to be ready and to responsibly meet the new reality offered by the membership in the Union, instead of furthermore posing as a subject of empty rhetoric, a tool for collecting daily political points or a reason for quasi-scientific studies with way too many illogical and unsystematic incompetent quote-based fragments of foreign literature.

On the other hand, a summary can be provided using a very interesting fact and a witty interpretation of something that in 2003 appeared in the Macedonian public as a

stylized star/sun, with the message "The sun, too, is a star," in the interest of popularization of the European idea and the belonging of the Republic of Macedonia in the European Union. Namely, besides the fact that the star is a sun, also the sun becomes (remains) a star too, and the same represents "a reflection of the unbearable everlasting ontological duality of Macedonia. Historically, geographically and culturally, Republic of Macedonia has always been in Europe. Today, Republic of Macedonia does not actually participate in the most important institutional and life form of Europe – the European Union. Republic of Macedonia is in the loop (Europe), but not in the circle (European Union). The form and the content are in disharmony and that duality becomes unsustainable and unbearable. The sun has to become a star in order to become a sun" (Taskovska 2004: VII).

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