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European Perspectives of North Macedonia: EU Enlargement Challenges

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Abstract

After a decade of positive recommendations by the European Commission for opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia, the Council has finally launched them in March 2020. During this period, for more than ten years, Macedonian authorities faced the challenge of maintaining a level of interest in the European prospects of the country without receiving many positive signals that the integration will happen in a reasonable timeframe.

“In light of the progress achieved on reforms and the fulfilment of the conditions set unanimously by the Council in June 2018, the Council, subject to endorsement by the European Council members, decides to open

accession negotiations with the Republic of North Macedonia”¹. The General Affairs Council conclusions on enlargement and stabilization and association process for the Republic of North Macedonia and the Republic of Albania were confirmed by the Members of the European Council on 26 March 2020². This is the *good news*. Less encouraging is the fact that there is no precise date when the negotiations will be opened. The history of EU enlargement shows us that the decision to launch negotiations with other countries from the region (Serbia, Montenegro and Croatia) has always been accompanied by a start date for the negotiations, but this is not the case now. According to the Council conclusions, and as the updated country reports identify, both countries (North Macedonia and Albania) “had demonstrated their determination to advance the EU reform agenda and had delivered tangible and sustained results,

¹ General Affairs Council- Council conclusions on enlargement and stabilization and association process for the Republic of North Macedonia and the Republic of Albania, Brussels, 25 March 2020. Available at: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7002-2020-INIT/en/pdf>. Accessed on 27 March 2020.

² Joint statement of the Members of the European Council Brussels, 25 March 2020. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/43076/26-vc-euco-statement-en.pdf>. Accessed on 27 March 2020.

fulfilling the conditions identified by the June 2018 Council for the opening of the accession negotiations”³. The first intergovernmental conference should be convened as soon as possible after the adoption of the negotiating framework by the Council. However, prior to the first intergovernmental conference, both countries have to implement a number of reform measures which will impact on the actual start of negotiations. The fight against corruption and organised crime remains a long-term objective as well as the tangible progress regarding reform of public administration and further progress in the adoption of legislation. The Commission expects that reform work will continue in both countries respectively and that the conditions will be met soon in order to launch the accession negotiations⁴.

Many political debates were launched about the enlargement of the European Union after the European Council meeting in October 2019 failed to agree to open accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania. The EU’s commitment to the European perspective of the region was in question. The debate for the profound disillusionment with the European project was easily catalyzed in the Western Balkans. The EU’s credibility was undermined, in particular in the Macedonian case, where the change of the constitutional name was expected to open the “window of opportunity” for European integration. This

³ General Affairs Council- Council conclusions on enlargement and stabilization and association process for the Republic of North Macedonia and the Republic of Albania, Brussels, 25 March 2020. Available at: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7002-2020-INIT/en/pdf>. Accessed on 27 March 2020.

⁴ “Accession negotiations opened with Albania and North Macedonia but no date set yet”. Brussels Times. Available at: <https://www.brusselstimes.com/all-news/eu-affairs/103517/accession-negotiations-opened-with->

was additionally dynamized by the new methodology for enlargement proposed by France in November 2019⁵ that called for a more merit-based system, able to provide more tangible benefits earlier in the process, and able to be reversed if the country fails to fulfill requirements.

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North Macedonia faced a complex political reality: the Prespa Agreement was expected to accelerate the development of relations with the Union after the name dispute with Greece had been closed, but the EU responded by postponing the date for start of negotiations and “raising the threshold” with the new methodology. This generated Euroscepticism among different forces at the national level. A public opinion survey published in February 2020 shows that 31.9% of the citizens responded positively to the question: do you expect that the country will be granted a date for opening of the negotiations in 2020. 57,8% of the Macedonian citizens did not expect this to happen in 2020⁶.

[albania-and-north-macedonia-but-no-date-set-yet/](#) . Accessed on 30 March 2020.

⁵ “Non-Paper: Reforming the European Union Accession Process” (issued by the French Government in November 2019). Available at: <https://g8fip1kplyr33r3krz5b97d1-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Enlargement-nonpaper.pdf> . Accessed on 28 March 2020.

⁶ Nikolovski I. Kirhner, J.M. (2020). “What now? The Uncertainty of North Macedonia’s EU Accession”. IDCS and Konrad Adenauer Stifting. Available at: <https://www.kas.de/documents/281657/281706/A5-What+now+The+uncertaintyof+North+Macedonia%>

The wider context of the Macedonian political scene shows that EU integration is one of the driving aspirations of the Macedonian foreign policy since its independence in 1991. Diplomatic relations with the EU were established in 1995 and were followed by the Agreement of wide-ranging cooperation in the fields of trade, financial operations and transport in 1997.

North Macedonia was the first country from the region that signed a Stabilization and Association Agreement (SSA) with the EU in 2001 and the first country in which an SSA entered into force on 1 April 2004. The SSA provided a framework for political dialogue and strengthened regional cooperation. It strengthened economic relations among parties and established grounds for technical and financial support. The SSA has made a tremendous impact in the process of policy harmonization, legislation and promotion of European values among Macedonian institutions and citizens. The European Council awarded the country candidate status in December 2005 and in February 2008, the Council adopted the revised Accession Partnership with the country. After the candidate status was granted, Macedonian foreign policy has been focused on achieving a date for the start of negotiations with the EU.

The European Commission first recommended to open accession negotiations with the Republic of North Macedonia in October 2009⁷. Positive recommendations have been received for over a decade until it was finally decided to open the negotiations in March this year. During this period of more than ten years, Macedonian authorities faced the challenge

of maintaining a level of interest in the European prospects of the country without receiving many positive signals that integration would happen in a reasonable timeframe. The only green light received by the European Council was visa liberalization, granted for the Macedonian citizens at the end of 2009.

The name dispute with Greece has been one of the greatest obstacles to the integration process when it comes to valorization of the reforms implemented: regardless of the internal dynamic of reforms, the country's accession was vetoed by Greece.

A milestone in the country's EU integration process was expected after the name dispute with Greece was resolved and the Prespa Agreement was signed. Macedonian citizens had high expectations that after the painful change of the constitutional name, the EU membership process would be advanced and the accession negotiations would be opened. But the EU failed to launch negotiations in June and October 2019. The leading opponents for further enlargement, France and the Netherlands, sounded criticism over reforms in the fields of democracy and fighting corruption. They were both skeptical of allowing in new members at a time when the EU's cohesion was already affected by the UK leaving the Union. This pattern of decision-making fueled by an 'enlargement fatigue' had been seen before. In fact, back in 2005, France and the Netherlands, after the rejection by referendum of the Union's proposed constitution, both resisted enlargement because the voters perceived it as a threat to the future of their countries. The arguments of these leading Member States against

[27s+EUaccession+in+2019What%28MKD%29.pdf/96cb9f1b-a7ce-61f6-a31c-30da2d28fc67?version=1.0&t=1582815182418](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/enlargement/republic-north-macedonia/)

⁷ EU enlargement: The Republic of North Macedonia. Available at:

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/enlargement/republic-north-macedonia/>. Accessed on 28 March 2020.

further EU enlargement were that the Union should focus on its internal weaknesses before launching new negotiations and that the candidate countries must deliver results in the fight against corruption and organized crime.

The EU has learned its lesson from previous enlargements, when underprepared Member States joined the Union and a heavy price was paid. But this shortsighted approach might lead the EU not to see the forest for the trees. If the EU can't identify its strength and use its potential transformative power in the societies that are in an urgent need for reforms, then the momentum will be lost. It is a fact that the Western Balkan countries are facing serious problems in tackling corruption, organized crime, rule of law, strengthening the democratic processes, media freedom, etc. The EU shouldn't undermine its transformative impact on national level decisions among EU aspirant countries. As Uslaner emphasizes, "Societies develop "cultures of corruption" because they are trapped in a vicious cycle of high inequality, low out-group trust, and high corruption"⁸.

There has to be a way to come out of this process and the EU has practical knowledge how to achieve it. That is why strong engagement in the region is essential.

When France proposed the new methodology for enlargement last November there were different

⁸ Uslaner, Eric M. (2008). "Corruption, Inequality, and the Rule of Law: The Bulging Pocket Makes the Easy Life." Cambridge University Press. p. 6.

⁹ "The French non-paper: Are there any implications for Kosovo's EU integration process?". European Western Balkans. Available at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/01/27/the-french-non-paper-are-there-any-implications-for-kosovos-eu-integration-process/>. Accessed on: 31 March 2020.

¹⁰ "Seven stages of EU accession: This is how France would reform the process" European Western Balkans, 18.11.2019. Available at:

interpretations for this renewed approach in the enlargement policy. Some considered it as an indictment of the lack of reforms done by the Balkan countries⁹, but by other analysts it was seen as a "justification for the blockade towards opening accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania"¹⁰ and for a third group of EU specialists it was an attempt by the French to reflect a more serious engagement in the Enlargement process after Macron's statement that the EU needs to 'deepen' before it takes a decision to 'widen'¹¹. Regardless of the motives, the French proposal was based on replacing the current 35 negotiating chapters with seven stages of the accession process, with "stringent conditions in order to effectively converge towards European norms and standards"¹². Additionally, there was a "reversibility" component allowing the EU to abandon membership talks if the government failed to deliver the required standards. The non-paper also included gradual association, stringent conditions and tangible benefits.

The French proposal has its advantages in respect of setting out much needed interim benchmarks and rewards by segmenting the accession negotiation process. But instead of accelerating accession, the negotiations will slow down the process because "once the negotiations are opened, the integration process would no longer be based on simultaneous opening of a large number of thematic chapters, but on several successive

<https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/11/18/s-even-stages-of-eu-accession-this-is-how-france-would-reform-the-process/>. Accessed on 29 March 2020.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² "Non-Paper: Reforming the European Union Accession Process" (issued by the French Government in November 2019). Available at: <https://g8fip1kplyr33r3krz5b97d1-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Enlargement-nonpaper.pdf>. Accessed on 28 March 2020.

stages, which would form coherent policy blocks”¹³. It is almost impossible to expect Western Balkans leadership to implement painful reforms and carry out concessions on national matters when the reward is expected to happen after 20 years or even more, considering the fact that there are numerous vetoing opportunities and unilateral political requirements in the meantime.

However, the French methodology was bypassed by the Council’s unanimous decision to open negotiations for North Macedonia and Albania, but this doesn’t mean that the EU will not revise the accession criteria.

A proposal for a new enlargement methodology adopted by the European Commission is already on the table and has been presented for the Macedonian authorities as more credible, with a stronger political steer, more dynamic and predictable¹⁴.

The European Commission is expected to draft and propose the draft negotiation framework with North Macedonia, integrating the elements of the revised methodology¹⁵. The first intergovernmental conference will be convened as soon as the negotiation frameworks are adopted by the Council.

Both the European Commission and Macedonian national authorities have important tasks in the upcoming period.

The Commission is about to revive EU conditionality, which is the heart of enlargement. Its approach should find a balance between being strict and merit based, and offering concrete rewards and integration impetus for the candidate countries in order to encourage them in the harmonization and implementation of European standards and values. If the political will is revived among the EU leadership, the improved enlargement methodology may encourage enthusiasm for reform among the Western Balkans candidate countries. If a merit-based system is introduced replacing the arbitrary blocking, together with meaningful rewards and a quicker and more dynamic timeframe, the national authorities will be more motivated to move the process forward. European promises have a value only if they are realized.

The challenges for the Macedonian authorities in the upcoming period should be based on keeping a sustainable democratic institutional capacity *vis-à-vis* the expected opening of accession talks. Internal commitments should be focused on the *implementation* (which means more than just adoption) of dynamic reforms in all the key areas that can provide successful transformation of the country’s political system and open the door to European integration.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ “Enhancing the accession process - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans”, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, Brussels, 5 February 2020. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood->

[enlargement/sites/near/files/enlargement-methodology_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/enlargement-methodology_en.pdf). Accessed on 29 March 2020.

¹⁵ “Commission welcomes the green light to opening of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia” Press release, 25 March 2020. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_519 . Accessed on 29 March 2020.

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