

## INTEGRATION AND STABILITY: CASE OF NORTH MACEDONIA

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### Abstract

European integration has been recognized as a key strategy for achieving the objective of stability and development in the Western Balkans. This reputation has been accomplished thanks to the European involvement in southeast Europe, sometimes specifically with individual countries alone and in other cases involving simultaneously more countries by introducing various regional projects and other affiliated programs that have created positive effects, long-term stability management and prevention of misperceptions between countries and ethnic groups. European institutions within the programs and strategies for the dissemination of core values have identified the prospects of membership in the European Union as the most affordable option for long-term growth and prosperity of the region. These views are shared by many politicians and citizens of the region who upon being given access to European political and economic institutions have come to realize that European Integration is the long-term response to fragmentation, conflict and economic backwardness. Within this perspective, the analysis of this paper is focused in the case of North Macedonia. The involvement of European Union in stabilizing Macedonia has been multidimensional but most crucially through active diplomatic involvement by facilitating the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement and the subsequent signing of Stabilization and Association Agreement. In 2003 Macedonia was able to apply for EU membership, which meant free access to European markets and aid funds needed to carry out institutional reforms. This article initially provides theoretical background on what integration refers to, examines the political discourse in the Macedonian society and how it is reflected on the institutional reforms that needed to be adopted as precondition in its path to European integration.

Keywords: European Union, Integration, Institutional Reforms, Stability

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### Introduction

In its journey since the independence, Macedonia has had an objective of establishing itself as a recognized state in the international context but also it was striving to achieve a degree of internal stability. On one side it was attempting to reach an internal cohesion of its divergent ethnic groups and on the other side it was facing a volatile neighborhood as a result of the breakup of Yugoslavia, constituent part of which was Macedonia itself. The country has continuously tried to fulfill these objectives through close following of the regional developments but also through application of balanced policies in the domestic field. The following years have shown that most appropriate policies have been those that have characterized themselves as aligned with the politics of European Integration. The process of European Integration has given Macedonia various benefits in finding a right approach to solving its aforementioned challenges but also has come across difficulties in fulfilling its strategic aspirations, the necessities of building institutional performance and the actual capacities in achieving the stability it desired.

Despite the fact that Macedonia from today's perspective is amongst the first countries in the Western Balkans to have begun the European pathway it continues to face challenges that could

not be easily overcome in achieving the objective of full integration in the European Union institutions. Ever since 2001 it has made various efforts in the implementation of measures and reforms required by the EU institutions, however the competing views of whether building the state in a traditional concept at times prevails over the need for adequate reforms and meaningful adaptation of its domestic institutions in conformity with European institutional values.

Although the journey of Macedonia to the European Union is represented as the main strategic aim in the public discourse as most of the countries from Western Balkans that are seeking European integration do, Macedonia also is facing a tension between the public reaction and the fulfillment of its political needs. These tensions and efforts result with different effects in meeting the challenges of internal and external nature that appear on the journey towards full European Integration.

The paper will argue that Macedonia was able to achieve much of the required transformations through an active involvement of International Community as a whole but more thoroughly looks at the assistance that EU has provided as a third party in achieving the necessary social and institutional reforms. The EU assistance has been received by the political elite of the country as means of fulfilling the Macedonians public desire of becoming a member of the European family. This internal perception has given the European Institutions the green light to actively participate in bringing Macedonia closer to Europe but also provided it with necessary resources to make adequate institutional changes and reforms so it becomes a more cohesive and integrated society. In order to assess these activities, the focus of the analysis will be over the structural changes through political developments in Macedonia, and the transfer of values and norms brought about by EU involvement and their incorporation into the Macedonian context.

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

Since we will focus our discourse on the integration process of Macedonia we will elaborate shortly the integration theory. Amongst key theories that elaborate integration processes are based on the perspective and discourse of institutionalism. Institutionalism explains the impact of International relations in the establishment and implementation of norms, rights and obligations of international organizations and institutions promoting the need to solve problems and disputes through international organizations or regional institutions. In this respect the attention of theories of integration is focused on the analysis of the historical institutionalization in a way that actually explains the essence of regional integration, as is the example of integration of the European countries or the states that aspire to integrate in it (Crysochoou 2001).

One of the most intriguing segments of Integration is the theoretical approaches of analyzing the enlargement process as in most of the studies it is tackled from the angle of comparative analysis. Instead Integration is simultaneously situated both outside of the Union and inside of it, working its way through the dimension of internal and external politics of states and taking place at the interface between the external and internal dimensions of European integration. It hence represents a key segment for analysis for both forces of internal and external change and mechanisms of change that aspiring countries or receiving ones undertake for the process of full integration to take place (Faber, 2009).

In their analysis of the state of enlargement, Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier proposed defining “enlargement” as “a process of gradual and formal horizontal institutionalization”. Although the formal process of enlargement has clearly defined dates and schedules it seems that the above definition fits quite well for reasons that these events may have had a different speed for different countries in its various stages of full membership and sometimes continuing even after that. It is prepared by a long history of pre-accession negotiations and followed by a post-accession process. From here we may understand that, horizontal institutionalization seems to refer to the concept of proceeding in common and at the same speed among all member states as they adopt and readopt for the process of integration to take place in qualitative as well as policy areas (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, August 2002).

It might be argued that in order to better understand the models and aspects of the impact of European integration one should focus on the contributions of institutionalism and theories of institutional change in order to capture the potential institutional effects of enlargements and integration. In fact, there may be a series of approaches that have analyzed the effect and potential influence of enlargement from a theoretical perspective of institutionalism. Steunenberg explores these impacts from different decision making processes as he illustrates possible scenarios and expanding them to the analysis of its impact not only from a political perspective but also an economic one (Steunenberg, 2001).

Through functionalism, as a theory with the greatest impact on the development of theories of integration, it is noted that the process of cooperation between countries in its initial form is limited in the areas of technical and functional cooperation and over time it expands the range of cooperation into economic and social fields incorporating all areas as means of cooperation including that of political cooperation (Mitrany, 1996).

In this regard, one of the most prominent theorists of neo-functionalism, Ernst Haas describes integration as a process in which political actors of several separate national environments become convinced that they may need to move their loyalties, expectations and political activities toward new institutions, whose institutions are able or seeking jurisdiction over national states.

This broad definition includes social changing of loyalty and political aspects of decision-making for the creation of new political institutions that have direct effect and jurisdiction over part of the state affairs of its members or the aspiring ones. The opposite approach, called intergovernmentalism insists only on the political aspects of the integration and the importance of the sovereign will of the Member States. Overall, according to the more classical views of integration, it is a process through which countries delegate certain rights, legitimacy and sovereignty in its efforts to join an international, regional or global organization or institution (Haas, 1958).

It is to be noted from what was said above that integration and enlargement does not simply imply a concept of territorial enlargement but moreover as a process that may affect and impact the institutional transformation of the country that seeks integration into the EU but also at a degree the old member countries. The transformation in the case of enlargement seeks more qualitative change especially by the aspiring members since they need not only to adjust their institutions and be able to share same values and norms but also expand the capacity of acting politically under same shared institutions (Jano, 2009).

For the applicant countries, the most important pre-condition to be fulfilled is the political accession conditionality, having stable democratic institutions and respecting human and minority rights. Complying with the EU rules and norms is a necessary condition toward accession, although not all conditions have to be met before being invited for negotiations but as previously shown accession consistently is linked with progress toward political conditionality. Copenhagen criteria are given as the most sought after transformation that is required by the aspiring countries that seek for domestic reforms in numerous fields and various sectors (Jano, 2009).

### **Progress Through Transformation**

Throughout the period of the independence of Macedonia European Union has been in a position to impact Macedonia's internal and external political agendas through its extensive number of methods that have contributed to the stability of the country with its positive initiatives. With its activities on the ground and its massive financial support the EU has created an ability to spread its norms, values and principles dealing specifically with human rights, minority rights, the rule of law, liberal democracy and peaceful resolution of disputes. Although many of these reforms and adoptions are already in the constitution and legislation of Macedonia, the implementation and respect for them is difficult to achieve in a society where concepts such as liberal democracy or good governance are unknown or not properly understood. Macedonia is one of the countries in the Balkans to benefit from various programs of the EU for financial assistance, cooperation agreements and trade preferences (Cierco, March 2006).

Ethnic conflicts that occurred in the region of Western Balkans during the nineties as a result of the disintegration of the former Yugoslav Federation where Macedonia was a member, threatened to expand even more with the withdrawal of the Yugoslav Army. Macedonia's national economy was deteriorating as a result of the economic embargo imposed by Greece in 1994-5. In the other hand being a neighboring country, it was deeply affected by the economic embargo that UN imposed on Serbia. Many of these challenges require that Macedonia undertake at the same time deep institutional reforms which often require multi-dimensional approaches (Ragaru 2008).

The success of European Union has been multi-layered and responded to the need of Macedonian state to consolidate itself. In this respect a great contributor to the successful overcoming of the internal as well as regional challenges that Macedonia has faced since inception of independence have been its relations with European Union. Macedonia's relations with European Union have started in 1992 with the than European Community in various forms but more importantly are the economic ones. The peak of relations was achieved in 2005 when it received the status of candidate country. These relations have been fundamental in opening up Macedonia to the disputed issues that it faced internally and it has simultaneously helped Macedonia build better relations with its neighbors and other states in the wider region (Risteska).

Relations of European Union with Macedonia have had a two part engagements. In one hand are the measures provided and supported by EU to long term assistance through policies of structural reforms aiming at the strengthening of economic development, respect for democratic

principles and rule of law. This assistance has come through programs that have been in place since Macedonia's inception of independence such as PHARE or CARDS program. PHARE program is one of the pre-accessions instruments in the hands of European Union that provides financial assistance to aspiring countries in their quest to joining EU to transform their internal and economic structure as identified on the Road Maps for partnerships that determine the reform priorities for accession to EU (Schneckener, January 2002).

Macedonia became eligible for using PHARE funds in 1996 while in 1998 as an expansion of already successful cooperation with EU programs it was able to sign a Cooperation Agreement with EU that provided Macedonia with asymmetric trading preferences with European countries. Macedonia did benefit from structural and other funds from EU to perform the needed internal reforms and transformations in support not only of the enterprises, the financial sector and infrastructure but also in enhancing institutional performance and social cohesion. The range of financial assistance from 1992 when Macedonia established relations with the than European Communities until 2001 when it signed the stabilization and association Agreement reached closely to 450 million euros (Schneckener, January 2002).

The year 2001 marks another important milestone for the EU- Macedonia relations. In the backdrop of the looming ethnic crisis Macedonia was able to sign the Stabilization and Association Agreement with European Union as a carrot for solving its problems and start negotiations over the needed constitutional and other socio- economic reforms in Macedonia. Stabilization and Association Agreement is a tool provided to the five southeast European Countries to negotiate the terms of accession to the European Union. Macedonia as the first country to sign the Agreement gained a clear prospect of joining EU, regular economic aid, improved trade relations and an advanced political dialogue with EU. Macedonia as compared to other countries in the region was indeed relatively more stable at social level. It did have a degree of interethnic interaction through its power sharing model that existed since the country declared independence although it was corrupt in its power sharing arrangements (Cierco, March 2006).

As an aspiring country to become member of European Union, Macedonia has to fulfill the Copenhagen criteria's that require a country to establish a functioning democracy. This proved to be an incentive for consecutive governments to make the necessary structural and institutional reforms that will open the way for social and ethnic coherence. Thus by having close relations with EU Macedonia in way started at an early stage to carry on the reforms and requirements that essentially may have set the stage for the changes, be that constitutional that occurred with the signing of Ohrid Framework Agreement or institutional ones through the obligations it undertook with the signing of Stabilization and Association Agreement (European Commission, Progress Report, 2011).

## **Conclusions**

The process of integration plays an important role for the transformation and stabilization of the aspiring European Union countries. Although each country may undergo a different process of integration into EU institutions it is clear that every single country on its own has to undertake several of the changes that have to reflect both internally on how the state looks and acts as well as externally in order to approximate itself not only institutionally with the norms of the

organization that it wants to become member but also act simultaneously as they do. The institutional approximation is only one segment that needs change not excluding other areas that need to take place in qualitative areas. These changes will be able to sometimes radically change the institutional structure of the state to a degree that the political actors and the public opinion have to fully understand that social transformation as it affects each one in a gradual way. The transformation in the case of aspiring country seeks more qualitative change since they need not only to adjust their institutions and be able to share same values and norms but also expand the capacity of acting politically under same shared institutions.

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