

# THE PATH OF NORTH MACEDONIA TOWARDS THE EUROPEAN UNION

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## Abstract

In addition to being delayed as compared to the rest of the European post-communist states, the accession of the Western Balkan countries to the European Union has also been long and cumbersome. The Republic of North Macedonia, on the other hand, was the first country of the region to sign the Stabilisation and Association Agreement and was awarded the candidate status as early as December 2005. Although the Commission has since 2009 several years in the row issued recommendation to open accession negotiations, the European Council has repeatedly refused to set a date for EU accession talks with Macedonia. As a result, during the last decade, in terms of the progress towards the European Union, Macedonia has been lagging behind as compared to a number of other Western Balkan countries. The main aim of this paper is to analyse the path of the Republic of North Macedonia towards the European Union. More specifically, the paper will focus on several internal and external factors responsible for delaying country's progress towards the EU. It will be shown that long-lasting name dispute with Greece, the conflicting views with Bulgaria about shared history, slow pace of reforms and the process of antiquisation as well as the "enlargement fatigue" coupled with other internal problems of the Union, represent the most significant factors that have delayed Macedonia's accession to the EU. While the EU and all member states have praised Macedonia's historic agreement with Greece and friendly agreement with Bulgaria, some countries like France and the Netherlands still have objections to set the date for opening of the negotiation. Currently, the entire country is anxiously waiting Council's eventual decision in October 2019 to begin accession negotiations.

*Keywords:* Macedonia, European Union, integration, accession, factors

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## 1. Introduction

The accession of the Western Balkan (WB) countries to the European Union (EU) started later as compared to the rest of the European post-communist states. Predominantly, this happened because the EU was initially mainly preoccupied with the enlargement process of the Central and East European (CEE) countries, but also because during early 1990s the Western Balkans was engulfed in bloody wars that followed the disintegration of former Yugoslavia. The Republic of North Macedonia, on the other hand, was at certain stage considered the champion of euro-integration in the Western Balkans. It was the first country of the region to sign the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) and was awarded the candidate status as early as December 2005. However, although the Commission has since 2009 several years in the row issued recommendation to open accession negotiations, the European Council has repeatedly refused to set a date for EU accession talks with Macedonia. Although implementation by Macedonia of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement was the main precondition to the start of accession talks, the EU has in addition to the progress in democratic and economic reforms, also set further criteria for Macedonia concerning good neighbourly relations, including a resolution of the name issue with Greece. As a result, during the last

decade, in terms of the progress towards the European Union, Macedonia has been surpassed by a number of other Western Balkan countries.

The main aim of this paper is to analyse the path of the Republic of North Macedonia towards the European Union. Throughout the paper, special focus will be given to factors responsible for delaying country's progress towards the EU. The structure of the paper consists of four sections altogether, including introduction and conclusion. After the introductory section, in the second one the paper will focus on the long and cumbersome path of the Republic of North Macedonia towards the European Union. The third section represents the most relevant part of the paper and will analyse a set of main internal and external factors that have impeded Macedonia's progress towards the EU. It will be shown that long-lasting name dispute with Greece, the conflicting views with Bulgaria about shared history, slow pace of reforms and the process of antiquisation as well as the "enlargement fatigue" coupled with other internal problems of the Union, represent the most significant factors that have delayed Macedonia's accession to the EU. The paper ends with a concluding chapter that provides a summary of the main findings of our analysis.

## **2. The Long and Cumbersome Path of North Macedonia towards the European Union**

At the initial stage after the collapse of communism, the enlargement perspective for Western Balkan countries came with certain delay as compared to the rest of the European post-communist states. On the one hand, the EU was mainly preoccupied with the enlargement process of the Central and East European countries; while on the other hand, the Western Balkans was engulfed in bloody wars after the disintegration of former Yugoslavia. In addition, if in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) the phases of stabilisation, transition and integration indeed overlapped, they did follow one another (Demjaha, 2014, p. 13). In the Western Balkans, one could say that EU integration was a condition of stabilisation, rather than the other way around. This implies that the phases of stabilisation, transition and integration needed to proceed simultaneously for their mutually reinforcing effects to work (Batt, 2004, p. 19). Therefore, though the process of EU enlargement towards the Western Balkans reproduces many of the patterns of the Central and East European enlargement experience, at the same time it also introduces some new aspects to the evolving process of political conditionality. These additional new criteria reflect the changing international circumstances, the internal EU anxieties and balances, and the regional and country-specific contexts. Next to the Copenhagen principles and universal Western criteria, the EU adopted an additional cluster of criteria especially for the Western Balkans addressing the post-conflict regional challenges of reconstruction, stabilization and reform (Anastakis, 2008, p. 367).

In the aftermath of the 1999 Kosovo war, the EU introduced a more comprehensive and positive-looking regional approach through the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) for the Western Balkans and the regional Stability Pact (SP) for South-Eastern Europe. Clearly, EU leaders decided that a policy of emergency reconstruction, containment and stabilisation was not, in itself, enough to bring lasting peace and stability to the Balkans - only the real prospect of integration into European structures would achieve that. The European Councils at Feira and Nice "explicitly recognised the countries' vocation as potential candidates" and spoke of "a clear prospect of accession once the relevant conditions had been met" (Conclusions of the General Affairs Council, 1999). The Stabilisation and Association policy was designed to help the Balkan countries transform that aspiration into reality, and to establish a strategic framework for their relations with the EU. Consequently, the SAP, and its main components Stabilisation and Association Agreements (SAAs) and the Community Assistance

for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilisation (CARDS) program have become the principle means of implementation of current Western Balkans policy of the EU (Pippan, 2004, p. 222). In the years to follow, Macedonia and other countries of the region also continued to benefit hundreds of millions of euros from the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA). Such assistance was mainly focused to support the reform efforts in the field of governance and the rule of law, as well as growth and competitiveness (Kostoska, 2017, p. 404). However, this came with an increased political conditionality that placed the emphasis on the principles of peace, justice for war crimes, reconciliation, anti-discrimination, and good neighbourly relations. In addition, the EU reports and strategy papers stressed the state and institutional weakness of all the Western Balkan states and focused additionally on state-building, offering in parallel financial and technical assistance for the modernization of the local administrative structures (Anastakis, 2008, p. 368).

As for Macedonia, its ambition for the EU emerged on the political agenda in 1994, when the SDSM-led coalition established diplomatic and contractual relations with the EU. Due to the dispute over the name of the country with neighbouring Greece, the diplomatic relations between Macedonia and the EU were established much later than elsewhere in the region. Formally establishing relations followed the economically difficult situation of the country created by the Greek trade embargo and the EU embargo on FR Yugoslavia. After the institutionalization of relations in 1994, major steps were taken towards the final goal of EU accession by the government in power during 1998-2002. Macedonia joined the Stabilization and Association Process, and was the first country of the region to sign the Stabilization and Association Agreement in 2001. During the ethnic conflict in 2001, Macedonia climbed higher on the EU political agenda, due to the possible deterioration of the security situation in Macedonia and the region. The EU however remained committed to the post-conflict process in Macedonia afterwards too. In line with this, in 2001, Macedonia and the EU also concluded the Interim Agreement on the trade related issues that virtually provided free access to the EU market for Macedonia.

It was clear that during this period in Macedonia, “the European perspective has emboldened reformers and engaged society as a whole. The EU made fulfilment of the Ohrid Agreement a precondition for elevating Macedonia from ‘potential candidate’ to ‘candidate’ status” (Belloni, 2009, p. 320). At least initially, Macedonian and Albanian politicians have for the most part, supported the implementation of the Agreement, and the Macedonian public has subscribed to it as the necessary stepping-stone towards admission in the EU and NATO. On 22 March 2004, Macedonia handed in its membership application to the EU and was awarded with the candidate status in December 2005, mostly in recognition of the courageous implementation of the Ohrid Agreement reforms (Ragaru, 2008, p. 58). However, though being an EU candidate since 2005, Macedonia has yet not received the date for the start of accession negotiations. While implementation by Macedonia of the SAA remains a main precondition to the start of accession talks, the EU has in addition to the democratic and economic reform progress, also set further criteria for Macedonia. These criteria mainly concern good neighbourly relations, including a resolution of the name issue, successful implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement of 2001, cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia and the return of refugees (Shapovalova, 2009, p. 1).

On 20 February 2008, the dialogue on the liberalization of the visa regime of the EU towards the Republic of Macedonia was officially opened in Skopje during the visit of the then Vice-President of the European Commission and EU Commissioner responsible for Justice, Freedom and Security, Mr. Franco Frattini. As a part of that dialogue, in May 2008, the European Commission presented the Roadmap for the Republic of Macedonia, which contained clear criteria that needed to be fulfilled in order to obtain the visa liberalization. The requirements mainly concerned the security of documents, border management, asylum and migration, public order and security, as well as foreign relations and human rights. Consequently, on 15 July 2009 the European Commission approved a decision to allow citizens of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia entry to Schengen countries visa-free from 1 January 2010. In addition, in its annual report on enlargement adopted on 14 October 2009, the European Commission concluded that Macedonia had now “substantially addressed” the political conditions set out by the EU in order for accession negotiations to start. However, though the Commission issued the same recommendation in 2010 and 2011, mainly due to the name dispute with Greece, the Council has refused to set a date for EU accession talks with Macedonia (*Balkan Insight*, 2010). Today, ten years after the first recommendation by the European Commission for starting accession negotiations with Macedonia, the country is still waiting for the beginning of these negotiations. In the following section, we will analyse in detail the most important factors due to which North Macedonia has still not managed to start negotiations with the European Union.

### **3. Factors Impeding North Macedonia's Path towards the European Union**

As it will be shown, in addition to the demanding process of political and economic transition set by the standards and values of the EU, the Republic of North Macedonia has faced other additional obstacles on the road to EU membership. While one cannot undermine the importance of other objective difficulties that were in one way or another experienced by other candidate states, it seems that the name dispute with Greece has ultimately defined the dynamics of country's integration to the EU (Kosotoska, 2018, pp. 56-57). The name issue between the two countries has emerged on the agenda immediately after independence of Macedonia in 1991 due to Greek objections because of the existence of its Northern Province named “Macedonia”. The conflict intensified in 1993 when Macedonia incorporated the Vergina Sun into its flag, which arguably was the emblem of Philip's dynasty during the ancient Macedonia. Greece fiercely opposed such step and consequently decided to impose a trade embargo on Macedonia. In addition, it allowed the admission of Macedonia to the United Nations (UN) in April 1993 only under the provisional reference “the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”. This aspect of the dispute was resolved in 1995 when the two countries signed an UN-backed “Interim Agreement”. In line with the agreement's provisions, Macedonia removed the symbol from its flag and allegedly irredentist clauses from its constitution. At the same time, both countries committed to continue negotiations related to the name issue under the UN auspices (Daskalovski, 2017, pp. 327-328). In addition, in line with the agreement, Greece agreed not to object Macedonia's accession to international organizations of which Greece was itself a member, so long as it would accede under the provisional name reference (Ekinci, 2010, p. 42). Since then Greece became a close economic partner and one of the largest foreign investors in Macedonia, however the agreement as such did not contribute to full normalisation of relations between Greece and Macedonia. Consequently, since 2008 Greece has deliberately blocked Macedonia's admission to NATO as well as the beginning of negotiations for EU membership. After elections in 2017, in order to demonstrate that the EU was indeed a strategic priority for the country, the new Government of Macedonia engaged in resetting the prospects for EU integration through promotion of friendly bilateral talks with neighbouring countries. As a result, the attempts for the resolution

of naming dispute gained a new momentum, and it seemed that Macedonia was determined to put an end to the dispute with Greece. After several high-level bilateral meetings, initial signs of a possible breakthrough were becoming visible at the beginning of 2018. Finally, in June 2018 Macedonia reached a deal with Greece to change its name to the Republic of North Macedonia and put an end to almost three decades-long disputes. According to the “Prespa Agreement,” the new name will be used for all purposes (internationally, bilaterally and domestically), meaning that even countries that have earlier recognized the name “Republic of Macedonia” will also have to adopt North Macedonia (Smith, 2018). Afterwards the accord was ratified by the respective parliaments in both countries, while Macedonia also made the foreseen constitutional changes by a two-thirds parliamentary majority. After Macedonia completed the necessary constitutional changes, Greece agreed to stop blocking its bid to join the EU and NATO (Kostoska, 2018, pp. 61-62).

However, bilateral name dispute with Greece was not the only factor that impeded Macedonia’s path towards the EU. There was also a conflict with Bulgaria, mainly related to conflicting views about the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century shared history of the two countries as well as the ethnic distinction of the two nations. Namely, when in October 2012 the European Commission recommended for the fourth consecutive year the opening of accession negotiations with Macedonia, Bulgaria has in addition to Greece, also utilized its veto (Azizi, 2013, p. 2). It should be mentioned that immediately after Macedonia declared independence in 1991, Bulgaria recognized the newly created state, but refused to acknowledge that there is a legitimate Macedonian nation for fear of encouraging secessionist tendencies among the inhabitants of the Bulgarian Macedonia, many of whom have rejected a Bulgarian identity in favour of a Macedonian one (Glenny, 1996, p. 255). A positive breakthrough came in 1999 with the Joint Declaration that established bilateral process of resolving the ongoing political and historic dispute and at the same time opened the doors for new stages of political, economic and cultural cooperation. Still, in July 2006, then the Bulgarian Foreign Minister Kalfin and former President Parvanov have made it clear that Bulgaria's support for Macedonian membership will not be unconditional. Main concerns that the Bulgarian high-level representatives raised at this point were mainly related to the aggressive and negative stances furthered by the Macedonian authorities about the Bulgarian history in particular and Bulgaria in general (Azizi, 2013, p. 2). After Bulgaria’s full membership to the EU, the two countries in 2011 signed the Memorandum of Cooperation in the field of EU integration that provided access to lessons learned from Bulgaria’s accession process with the goal of strengthening the administrative capacity in Macedonia. Finally, in August 2017 the newly elected government of Macedonia signed a friendship accord with Bulgaria in an attempt to improve links with its Balkan neighbours and revive efforts to join the EU and NATO (Okov, 2017). Nevertheless, nowadays when Macedonia is anxiously awaiting Council’s decision on eventual start of accession negotiations, Bulgarian representatives have clearly warned that “Bulgaria will not allow the EU integration of the Republic of North Macedonia to be accompanied by European legitimization of an anti-Bulgarian ideology”, sponsored by Skopje. Namely, although the Bulgarian government’s “Framework Position” supports giving North Macedonia and Albania a start date for EU accession negotiations at the European Council meeting slated for October 17, at the same time such Framework sets tough terms for North Macedonia’s progress towards EU (Jakov Marusic, 2019).

In addition to these two impeding factors related to bilateral disputes with Greece and Bulgaria, there were other internal and external factors that have stalled Macedonia's progress towards the EU. Internally, one such factor was undoubtedly the halted and sometimes even blocked pace of accession reforms. Namely, after the Greek veto at the NATO Summit in Bucharest in 2008, and especially after Greece blocked the beginning of accession negotiations with EU in 2009, the VMRO-led government has gradually slowed down the pace of accession reforms. Instead, under the guise of fake patriotism and nationalism, it has started the so-called process of the "antiquisation". Such process included identity policies that were based on the assumption that there is a direct link between today's ethnic Macedonians and Ancient Macedonians. In addition to embracing the recollection of the alleged ancient heritage of the Ancient Macedonians, this nationalist process also sought to depict a coherent continuity of history from the ancient Kingdom of Macedon until the modern state of Macedonia. It included a "state-framed set of actions" such as direct interventions in the public space and in the public sphere of the society in general (Vangeli, 2011, p. 14). The best illustration of the whole process of antiquisation was the project "Skopje 2014" that actually represented turning point concerning the official narratives of Macedonian national identity, by denying previously widely accepted Slavic descent of ethnic Macedonians. As part of the project, hundreds of sculptures were built in order to construct an explicit narrative of mono-ethnic Macedonian identity by manufacturing a continuity from antiquity over the Middle Ages, through the time of Macedonian's struggle for nationhood to the current state (Kubiena, 2012, p. 78). In addition, highways, airports and sport stadiums were given names of the Alexander the Great, his father Philip II and other famous figures from the ancient Macedonia. Clearly, the ethno-nationalistic discourse of antiquisation has served well the purpose of Gruevski and VMRO-DPMNE by appealing to patriotic feelings of ethnic Macedonians. They were able to continuously win elections and consolidate their power, while at the same time blurring the problematic and questionable present with the image of the celebrated past (Vangeli, 2011, p. 22). However, a part from that, such process has had considerable negative consequences, both internally and externally. Internally, such nationalistic, mono-ethnic and mono-historic project has seriously undermined the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural reality of the country. As a result, it has additionally deteriorated inter-ethnic relations between ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians, while at the same time contributing to intra-ethnic frictions and growing fragmentation of the already unstable society (Spaskovska, 2012, p. 392). Externally, antiquisation has certainly irritated Greece and thus negatively influenced the dynamics of the name dispute. It has also deteriorated the international position of the country and isolated it even from main supporting countries within the EU.

In terms of external factors, similarly to other countries of the Western Balkans, Macedonia has suffered the consequences of the so-called "enlargement fatigue" and other internal problems of the EU. Since the enlargement waves in 2004 and 2007 when 12 new countries joined the EU, some member states have become increasingly sceptical about further enlargement of the Union. Consequently, once the unquestionably positive overall assessment of enlargement gave way to scepticism and the official assessment of enlargement as a success story shifted to an emphasis on enlargement fatigue. Even member states that once used to be champions of the EU's enlargement are lately becoming much more cautious and avoid too enthusiastic expressions. In addition to the enlargement fatigues, the EU has recently been facing a set of internal problems such as the pending departure of the United Kingdom (Brexit), democracy and rule-of-law concerns in Poland, Hungary, and some other EU member states, increased migration and related societal integration concerns as well as heightened terrorism threats. As a result, it is not clear whether further enlargement of the EU will happen any time soon or whether, instead, the WB states will find themselves on a "slow train to nowhere" (O'Brennan, 2014, p. 221). Although in its Communication in February 2018 the European



Commission reaffirmed the firm, merit-based prospect of EU membership for the Western Balkans, its enlargement policy paper also refers to the need for the Union to be “stronger and more solid, before it can be bigger” (Communication from the European Commission, 2018). These additional factors became visible after the signing of Prespa agreement with Greece and the bilateral friendship agreement with Bulgaria. The resolution of the name dispute was supposed to unblock North Macedonia’s path towards the EU. Expectations were very high among the political elites that the country will get a green light in October for beginning the accession negotiations. However, though most of the EU member states have openly supported this step, few countries, France and the Netherlands most notably, are still hesitant to grant Macedonia a date for starting the negotiations. In defence of its position, France has mentioned both external and internal factors highlighted above. Namely, France believes that the EU currently faces too many challenges itself, and should not let in two more states from the Balkan region. Paris insists that the EU first needs to reform internally and achieve vigour and unity for dealing with more important challenges such as climate change and migration. On the other hand, it points out that the North Macedonia and Albania are still not fully prepared to start the accession negotiations (Baszynska, 2019). Together with Netherlands, it insists that Macedonia needs to show progress on accession reforms related to intelligence and security services, judicial systems, proper investigations and verdicts of high-level corruption cases, as well as public administration (Kostoska, 2018, p. 61). It remains to be seen whether in the coming days Macedonia will receive a date for starting negotiations after obvious progress in overcoming bilateral problems with Greece and Bulgaria.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The enlargement perspective of Western Balkan countries was delayed compared to the Central and East European ones, mainly due bloody wars following the disintegration of former Yugoslavia. The Republic of North Macedonia, on the other hand, was the first country of the region to sign the Stabilisation and Association Agreement and was awarded the candidate status as early as December 2005. Although the Commission has since 2009 several years in the row issued recommendation to open accession negotiations, the Council has repeatedly refused to set a date for EU accession talks with Macedonia. As a result, during the last decade, in terms of the progress towards the European Union, a number of other Western Balkan countries has surpassed it. The paper concludes that there were a number of internal and external factors that have impeded Macedonia’s progress towards the EU. While, almost 30 years long name dispute with Greece seems to be the most significant one, the conflicting views with Bulgaria about shared history have also become a serious obstacle in recent years. In addition, it might be concluded that slow pace of reforms and the process of antiquisation have also slowed down Macedonia’s path towards the EU. Finally, similarly to other countries of the region, Macedonia has also suffered the consequences of the “enlargement fatigue” and other internal problems of the Union. After ending the name dispute with Greece in June 2018 by signing an agreement to change its name to the Republic of North Macedonia, Greece is no longer an obstacle to Macedonia’s progress towards the EU. Bulgaria has voiced certain concerns over bilateral relations, but has promised not to block the beginning of accession negotiations. Nevertheless, although the EU and all member states praised Macedonia for the historic agreement with Greece, the paper has shown that some countries like France and the Netherlands still have objections to set the date for opening of the negotiation. At the time of writing, the entire country is anxiously waiting Council’s eventual decision to begin accession negotiations.

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