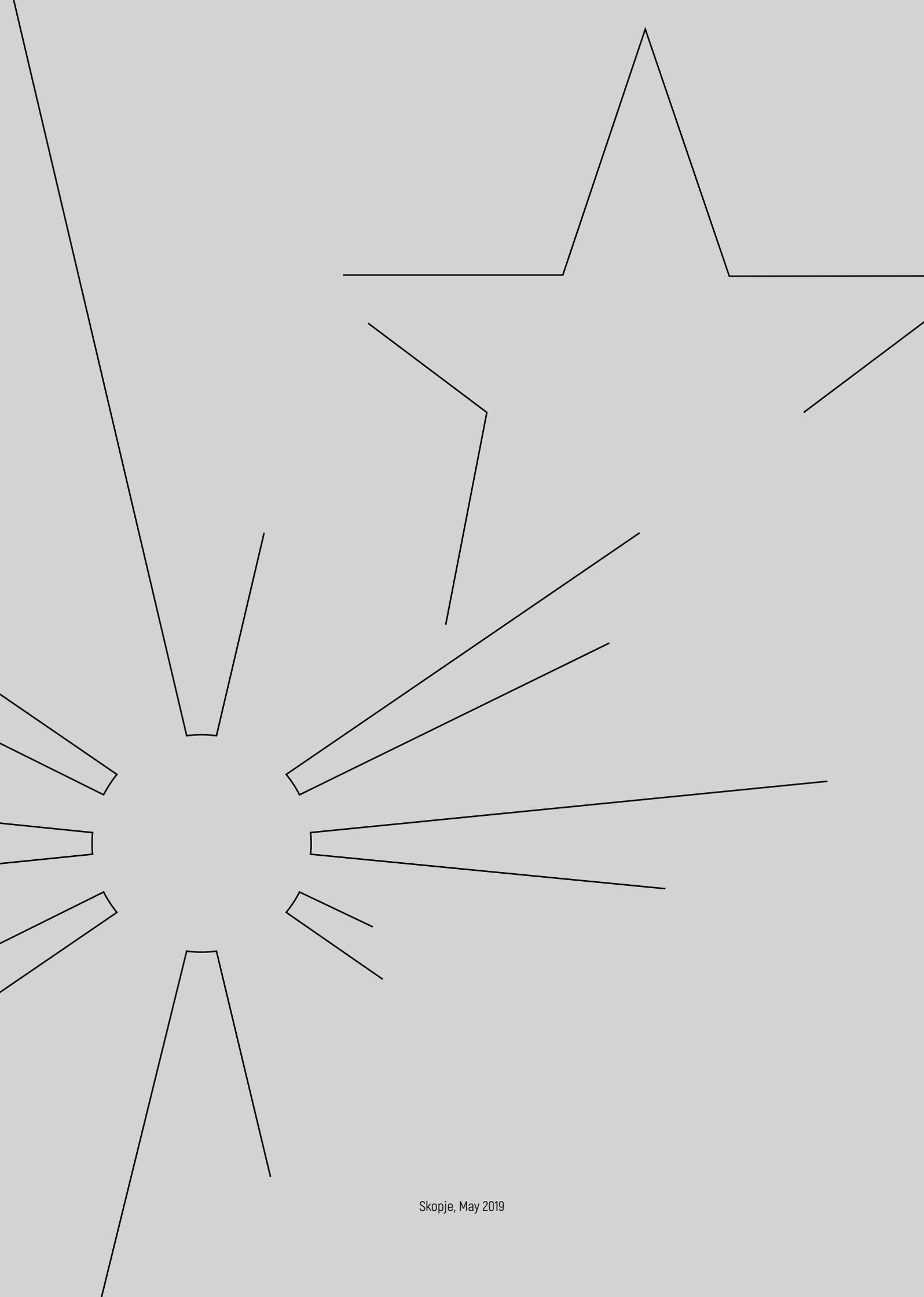




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Accession of the  
Republic of North  
Macedonia to the EU:  
Merits, Benefits and  
Implications





Skopje, May 2019

**Policy brief**

"Accession of the Republic of North Macedonia to the EU:  
Merits, Benefits and Implications"

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## Accession of the Republic of North Macedonia to the EU: Merits, Benefits and Implications

The EU integration of the Western Balkans is in the EU's own interest as it is essentially about creating long-term stability, prosperity as well as democratic and inclusive societies in the immediate neighborhood.<sup>1</sup> The President of the European Commission Jean Claude Juncker has emphasized that in order to have more stability in Europe, the EU must maintain a credible enlargement perspective for the Western Balkans.<sup>2</sup>

Ever since its independence in September 1991, the Republic of North Macedonia has continuously positioned itself towards achieving one of its key strategic priorities - full-fledged membership in the European Union. While carrying out this commitment, North Macedonia has reaffirmed itself as a reliable partner and strong ally of the EU, while signifying its determination and readiness to take on the comprehensive, dynamic and complex process of EU integration.

The EU's enlargement policy represents a strategic investment in peace, democracy, prosperity, security and stability in Europe.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, opening long overdue accession negotiations in 2019 remains the strategic objective of not only the Government of North Macedonia but of the entire country, as it would give way for finally positioning the country onto a secure EU path. The clear prospect for EU membership has been and continues to be the main driving force for the reforms in the country and is of the utmost importance for the political stability and the common goal of the country's political actors in North Macedonia.<sup>4</sup>

North Macedonia had expressed interest in becoming part of the EU ever since the early 1990s which was later formally recognized with the signing of the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) in 2001 due to the country's status as a regional front-runner, followed by the granting of the candidate status in 2005. Since then, the country has undergone a tedious reform process, which had been favorably assessed by the EU, with the notable exception of the prolonged period during which the country underwent a political crisis. However, North Macedonia has recently made significant progress and moved forward in the EU reform agenda as the current reform-oriented government has taken steps to strengthen rule of law and democracy, while the country is undergoing fundamental changes in a

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- 1 European Western Balkans. "Hahn: Prespa Agreement should not be sacrificed for party-political reasons" (16.04.2019) <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/04/16/hahn-prespa-agreement-not-sacrificed-party-political-reasons/>
  - 2 European Commission: "A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans" [2018] [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf)
  - 3 Council of the EU. Enlargement and Stabilization and Association Process - Council conclusions 2018 p.2 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/35863/st10555-en18.pdf>
  - 4 European Parliament. Report on the 2018 Commission Report on Macedonia (AFET) [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-8-2018-0341\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-8-2018-0341_EN.pdf)

more inclusive and open political atmosphere. These achievements were welcomed by the EU whereas they acknowledged that the country is well-prepared for accession negotiations, and emphasized that they remain firmly committed to fully support and accompany North Macedonia towards achieving its common strategic goal of EU integration.<sup>5</sup>

The most notable recent accomplishments which essentially gave way for maintaining and deepening the reform momentum with relation to good-neighborly relations include the historic Prespa Agreement between North Macedonia and Greece, as well as the Agreement for Friendship, Good-Neighborliness and Cooperation between North Macedonia and Bulgaria.

This policy paper aims to underline the merits of the Republic of North Macedonia, which serve as a main argument for receiving a date for opening accession negotiation with the EU during 2019, benefits from opening these negotiations, both for the Republic of North Macedonia and the EU, as well as the implications that would originate from not opening of accession negotiations in 2019 for both parties, in particular regarding the credibility and influence of EU in the Western Balkans.

## I. MERITS: NORTH MACEDONIA AS THE NEW BALKAN SUCCESS STORY

### North Macedonia: Champion in good-neighborly relations and reconciliation in the Western Balkan

North Macedonia has successfully promoted good-neighborly relations and regional cooperation and enabled effective settlement of bilateral issues with neighbors and therefore significantly contributed to the reconciliation in the whole Western Balkans region.

The EU has persistently noted that the settlement of open bilateral issues, as well as fostering bilateral and regional cooperation was a key pre-condition for starting accession negotiations and subsequent membership of North Macedonia to the EU. To that end, the incessant determination and impetus for securing a European future for the country and its citizens brought about the signing of historic agreements which enabled for resolving disputes and fostering of strong regional alliances.

**The Prespa Agreement<sup>6</sup>**, signed on 17 June 2018 between the Republic of North Macedonia and the Hellenic Republic, under the auspices of the United Nations, resolved a long-standing dispute between the two countries and in turn advances the EU and NATO accession perspectives of North Macedonia. In this regard, the Foreign Ministers of both countries signed the Agreement, which would officially rename the Republic of Macedonia to the Republic of North Macedonia.

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5 EU Delegation to RNM. HR/VP Mogherini and Commissioner Hahn on the final Parliamentary vote in Macedonia on the constitutional changes for the implementation of the Prespa Agreement [https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/republic-north-macedonia/56434/hrvp-federica-mogherini-and-commissioner-johannes-hahn-final-parliamentary-vote-former\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/republic-north-macedonia/56434/hrvp-federica-mogherini-and-commissioner-johannes-hahn-final-parliamentary-vote-former_en)

6 Final Agreement for the settlement of the differences as described in the United Nations Security Council Resolutions 817 (1993) and 845 (1993), the termination of the Interim Accord of 1995, and the establishment of a Strategic Partnership between the Parties

The agreement underlines the strong will for mutual friendship, good neighborly relations and cooperative partnership, the commitment to strengthen widen and deepen bilateral relations and to lay firm foundations for the entrenchment and respect of good neighborly relations and for the development of a comprehensive bilateral cooperation. It also seeks to reinforce and broaden bilateral cooperation and upgrade it to a level of strategic partnership in multiple areas including political relations, defense, economy, energy, trans-border cooperation among others.<sup>7</sup>

The ratification of the Prespa Agreement in the Parliament of North Macedonia has clearly shown the extensive and decisive efforts to overcome legacies of the past and foster reconciliation, as well as the strong political determination and the willingness to promote a climate of tolerance.<sup>8</sup>

The EU has supported the signing of the Prespa Agreement as an example of reconciliation for the region and Europe as a whole. It also pointed out that political leaders along with citizens have shown great determination to seize a unique and historic opportunity to solve a long-standing dispute and decisively move forward on the EU path.<sup>9</sup>

It is paramount to emphasize the significance of the signing and ratification of the Pres-

pa Agreement in North Macedonia as it represents a testament to the great concessions of the government as well as the citizens which were invested in this process so as to achieve a credible and stable Euro-Atlantic perspective.

The conclusion of the **Friendship Agreement** between North Macedonia and Bulgaria in August 2017 served as a noteworthy example on overcoming bilateral disputes and promoting regional Euro-Atlantic integration.<sup>10</sup>

The treaty recognizes both countries' territorial integrity, envisages the establishment of a commission that will work on resolving differing views of history, and contains a pledge to protect the rights of the other country's nationals living on their soil - but not interfere in the others' domestic affairs. Both sides also agreed to improving economic ties and improve human and minority rights. Most importantly, Bulgaria pledges to support North Macedonia's NATO and EU integration, as this document is seen as the basis of Bulgaria's guarantee to support North Macedonia in its Euro-Atlantic aspirations.<sup>11 12</sup>

The EU has also reiterated their support for the bilateral friendship treaty between North Macedonia and Bulgaria, which strengthened the long-lasting and conciliatory good-neighborly relations and in a short period of time produced tangible economic results between the two countries.<sup>13</sup>

7 Prespa Agreement <https://vlada.mk/sites/default/files/dokumenti/spogodba-en.pdf>

8 Council of the EU: Enlargement and Stabilization and Association Process - Council conclusions 2018 p.4 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/35863/st10555-en18.pdf>

9 EU Delegation to RNM. HR/VP Mogherini and Commissioner Hahn on the final Parliamentary vote in Macedonia on the constitutional changes for the implementation of the Prespa Agreement [https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/republic-north-macedonia/56434/hrvp-federica-mogherini-and-commissioner-johannes-hahn-final-parliamentary-vote-former\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/republic-north-macedonia/56434/hrvp-federica-mogherini-and-commissioner-johannes-hahn-final-parliamentary-vote-former_en)

10 The Economist. Macedonia and Bulgaria sign Friendship Treaty. (09/08/2017) [http://country.eiu.com/article.aspx?articleid=525768236&Country=Macedonia&topic=Politics&subtopic\\_5](http://country.eiu.com/article.aspx?articleid=525768236&Country=Macedonia&topic=Politics&subtopic_5)

11 Balkan Insight. Macedonia approves landmark Friendship Treaty with Bulgaria (15.01.2018) <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/01/15/macedonia-approves-landmark-friendship-treaty-with-bulgaria-01-15-2018/>

12 Reuters. Macedonia and Bulgaria sign Treaty to improve ties (01.08.2017) <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-macedonia-bulgaria-treaty/macedonia-bulgaria-sign-treaty-to-improve-ties-idUSKBN1AH4E3>

13 EU - North Macedonia Joint Parliamentary Committee: Recommendations (16th meeting - 28.03.2019 Strasbourg) <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/162282/FINAL%20%20recommendations%2016th%20JPC.pdf>

With the signing of these two agreements, North Macedonia has promoted good-neighboring relations and cooperation, and significantly contributed to the fostering of regional peace, stability and security. In light of this, by overcoming the final obstacle to North Macedonia's membership in NATO, as its 30th Member State, the country would further improve regional stability and only attest to its adherence to the values of democracy, rule of law and individual liberty, dialogue and confidence and security building measures.

### Improved political and democratic climate in North Macedonia

Plan 18 focuses on the four key reform priorities in the area of rule of law, specifically judiciary, reform of the security services, public administration reform, and anti-corruption policy, and has been prepared in coordination with the relevant ministries with competences in these areas, as well consultations with international community and civil society organizations. The progress in these areas will be directly reflected in the regular EC Report and it will affect the decision on determining a date for starting accession negotiations for EU membership.

This plan demonstrates notable achievement by the state institutions which is evidenced by the adopted laws, action plans, communications, strategies and other documents in the abovementioned areas.

## 1. Judiciary

As recognized in the latest Commission Report, decisive steps have been taken to start restoring the independence of the judiciary and reverse the backsliding of previous years. The most notable step was the adoption of a credible new judicial reform strategy (2017 - 2022), which aims to address the "Urgent Reform Priorities" and the recommendations of the Venice Commission. Its implementation is underway and the relevant Venice Commission recommendations concerning the discipline and dismissal system for judges were ad-

ressed through the adoption of the first set of amendments to the Law on the Judicial Council and the abolition of the Council for Determining Facts.

The judicial reform strategy envisages to increase specialization of judges and to limit the possibility of reassigning judges to different departments within courts. The Association of Judges took an active role in preparing the reforms and was vocal in advocating for the independence of judges. The practice of selective justice in certain politically sensitive cases, which also saw some judges avoiding such cases due to the pressure they might come under, has declined in recent months.

For the first time, the Ministry of Justice took the initiative to carry out an inspection of the application of the automated court case management information system (ACCMIS). This was a result of concerns expressed, *inter alia* by the Senior Experts' Group on systemic Rule of Law issues, and indications that the random assignment of cases was not systematically used.

## 2. Reform of the security services

A package of amendments to several laws and a new law on an Operational Technical Centre, to reform the system for intercepting communications were adopted by the government in December 2017. The amendments to the Law on Electronic Communication and the Law on Classified Information were enacted by the Parliament. These legal steps pave the way for the establishment of a new independent institution, the Operational Technical Agency (OTA). The OTA will be an intermediation body between the telecom operators and the authorities authorized to intercept communications for protection of the interest of security and the defense of the state and for the purpose of criminal investigations. Each authorized authority will intercept communications under its competences, following a court order. These authorities, including the OTA, will not be able to autonomously activate or deactivate the in-

terception of communications. These reforms are in line with the "Urgent Reform Priorities" as they remove the intermediary function from the Bureau for Security and Counterintelligence and its direct access to the switches. Moreover, director of OTA has been elected, acts on internal organization and systematization of job positions in the OTA have been adopted, as well the bylaws based on Law on OTA. In line with the focus of the Reform of the security services, Civil Oversight Council in accordance with the Law on OTA has been established.

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### 3. Public administration reform

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Particular efforts were made in order to achieve good results in this area, which was acknowledged by the Commission and clearly expressed in the EC Report. The results were manifested through the following.

The Public Administration Reform Strategy and Action Plan for 2018-2022 and the Public Financial Management Reform Programme 2018-2021 were both adopted. The strategy sufficiently addresses all core areas of public administration, including de-politicization and professionalization of the public administration.

Civil society and other stakeholders are increasingly being involved in the policy-making and legislative processes. Access to information, for the public as well as journalists, is improving, with a presumption of accessibility unless data is specifically classified. Government agendas and minutes are now published online. Amendments to the Law on administrative servants were adopted in January 2018.

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### 4. Anti – corruption policy

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The legal framework for the fight against corruption is broadly in place. The Criminal Code penalizes a wide range of corruption-related offences.

With the enactment of the Law on Prevention of Corruption, the competences of the State Com-

mission for Prevention of Corruption (SCPC) were expanded and several new competences were introduced, among which an explicit and precise competence for monitoring the financing of political parties. Also, a new composition of the SCPC was envisaged, the conditions for the appointment of president and members of the SCPC were changed as well as the procedure for election of the composition of the SCPC. The SCPC's activities increasingly focus on training sessions on anti-corruption and conflicts of interest.

The work of the Special Prosecutor's Office is an important contribution to the fight against high-level corruption. There are now several high-level corruption cases before the courts. Following consultation of the Venice Commission, the Law on the protection of whistle-blowers was adopted.

Discussions have begun on how best to integrate the Special Prosecutor's Office (established in 2015 to investigate the illegal wiretaps and their content) into the Basic Public Prosecutor's Office against organized crime and corruption, to strengthen the fight against corruption. Efforts are made in order to achieve this objective.

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### 5. Fundamental rights

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The legal and institutional framework for protection of fundamental rights is largely in place. The country took an important step towards its gradual alignment with EU standards in the area of fundamental rights by becoming an observer in the Fundamental Rights Agency. The country ratified the Istanbul Convention, improved the climate for media (there has been a decrease in pressure on journalists with the improved political climate), worked towards upgrading the legislative framework for non-discrimination and started creating the legal conditions for establishing an external oversight mechanism of the police. On protection of personal data, the country has ratified Convention 108 of the Council of Europe on the Protection of Individuals with regard to Automatic

Processing of Personal Data and its additional protocol. Freedom of thought, conscience and religion continued to be guaranteed.

Regarding the freedom of expression, the legislative framework is broadly aligned with both the *acquis* and international standards. Amendments to the Law on Audio and Audio-Visual Media Services were prepared in consultation with relevant stakeholders. There is an improved climate for media and journalists are more prepared to criticize misbehavior of officials and censorship. Freedom of association and freedom of assembly are both guaranteed by the constitution. There was particular improvement of the legal framework on non-discrimination. The Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination improved alignment with European standards and the EU *acquis*. What was essential for the law was to also include sexual orientation and gender identity as grounds for discrimination. Regarding the equality between women and men, it is to be noted that the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention was ratified in December 2017. With respect to the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) persons, the new prime minister and the political leadership have publicly expressed support for the rights of LGBTI persons and committed to making progress in this area. In Parliament, an inter-party group consisting of 13 MPs was formed to advocate the rights of LGBTI persons in February 2018.

#### Acceleration of reforms to improve economic growth and the business climate

As North Macedonia has made significant progress in relation to improving bilateral re-

lations with neighboring countries, in particular with Bulgaria and Greece, while maintaining positive relations with other countries in its immediate neighborhood such as Serbia, Albania and Kosovo, in a matter of months, the country has managed to become a factor of stability in the region.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the significant setbacks endured by the Macedonian economy in the past few years due to the lengthy political crisis, its successful resolution brought about the acceleration of comprehensive economic reforms and improvement of the overall economic growth and the business climate in the country.

North Macedonia has made progress in developing a functioning market economy. Noteworthy improvements have taken place, in particular with regard to public finance management and transparency.<sup>15</sup> In addition, increased efforts are continuously invested in improving the overall business environment, the structural problems of the labor market and maintaining macroeconomic stability. As regards the labor market, the government of North Macedonia has created a detailed development plan which has a strong emphasis on social inclusion and support for local businesses, as well as on regional integration and advancing the country's EU and NATO aspirations.<sup>16</sup>

To that end, it is noteworthy to emphasize that starting accession negotiations with the EU and becoming a NATO member is expected to bring about the strengthening of the economic and business climate in the country and serve as a guarantee for sustainable political and democratic stability. It would pave the way to intensifying of trade and investment relations with the EU, combatting the informal economy and

14 European Commission. 2018 Report on Macedonia <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20180417-the-former-yugoslav-republic-of-macedonia-report.pdf>

15 European Commission - Fact Sheet: Key findings on the 2018 Report on Macedonia [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_MEMO-18-3405\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-18-3405_en.htm)

16 EBRD Transition Report 2017-18: Sustaining Growth - Country Assessment: Macedonia <https://www.ebrd.com/documents/oce/pdf-transition-report-201718-fyr-macedonia.pdf>

corruption, and addressing the lack of systemic and efficient law enforcement and non-transparent regulatory framework.<sup>17</sup> It would also enable for tackling of the weaknesses in the education curricula, low innovation rates and important investment gaps.<sup>18</sup>

In sum, achieving comprehensive and tangible results in the socio-economic sphere would in turn further strengthen North Macedonia's credibility as a full-fledged EU Member State.

## II. BENEFITS FROM OPENING ACCESSION NEGOTIATIONS IN 2019

### Benefits for the Republic of North Macedonia

Integration to the European Union is a key strategic objective for North Macedonia that will improve the country's democratic climate, strengthen its stability and economy and enhance the working and living conditions of all citizens. Opening of accession negotiations is the crucial step in achieving this goal, that shall adequately prepare the country for adopting the European values and principles.

The start of accession negotiations will **increase the awareness and importance of the European Union's fundamental values in North Macedonia**, such as rule of law, democracy, equality and human rights and freedoms. While transposing the relevant acquis into national law, the country will adopt the fundamental European standards and enshrine them as paramount to its integration processes. Furthermore, the oversight exercised by Member States during the entire process of accession

negotiations will ensure the country's thorough and unequivocal adherence to the European values.

The division of the EU acquis into 33 individual negotiation chapters represents a unique, well-organized framework for tracking the country's progress and an **impetus for positive change** in all areas of its law and practice. The start of accession negotiations will put a stronger focus on the necessary reforms and increase public support for EU integration, thus motivating and supporting the country and its institutions in their efforts for adherence to the high standards of the European Union.

The prompt start of accession negotiations will provide a **great incentive for socio-political and economic progress in North Macedonia**. Having received an appropriate recognition for the fulfillment of the criteria outlined in the 2018 Council conclusions<sup>19</sup>, the country and its citizens shall be further encouraged to achieve even greater successes in the areas of rule of law and democracy, improving the democratic and political climate and strengthening the stability of North Macedonia and the entire region. Finally, the shift from a candidate country to an acceding country will open new opportunities, granting access to a wider range of EU internal policies and funding programs.

### Benefits for the European Union and its Member States

On the other hand, the start of accession negotiations is of immense benefit to the European Union and its Member States. As noted by Commissioner Hahn, the historic project of European integration can only be finalized through the

<sup>17</sup> Council of the EU. Enlargement and Stabilization and Association Process - Council conclusions 2018 p.15 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/35863/st10555-en18.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> European Commission - Fact Sheet: Key findings on the 2018 Report on Macedonia [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_MEMO-18-3405\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-18-3405_en.htm)

<sup>19</sup> Council of the European Union. General Affairs Council. "Council conclusions on enlargement and stabilization and association process." Brussels, 26 June 2018. 10555/18; ELARG 41; COWEB 102. Available on: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/35863/st10555-en18.pdf>

integration of the Western Balkans<sup>20</sup>. The proper, merit-based accession of the six countries of the Western Balkans will represent **a successful completion of the EU idea** of an even closer union among the peoples and Member States of the European Union.

Without a doubt, the accession negotiations are a lengthy, complex process that will allow for **larger oversight by the European Union and its Member States on the progress of North Macedonia**. During this process, the Member States exercise closer authority and influence over the country's progress in every stage from opening to provisional closing of each chapter. In addition, the length and complexity of the accession negotiations process will allow the European Union and its Member States to **unimpededly complete the necessary internal reforms** before the actual accession of the Western Balkan countries into the European Union.

With a unanimous decision to open accession negotiations with North Macedonia in 2019, the European Union shall once again demonstrate its leadership and confirm its dedication to improving the progress of the Western Balkan states. Through an objective and credible acknowledgement of the achieved progress of North Macedonia as a true success story in the region, **the European Union will maintain its positive influence on the Western Balkans**.

The decision to open accession negotiations shall put a strong emphasis on the positive track record of EU enlargement policy as a successful tool of foreign policy of the Union, and will be a bold move that shall indisputably provide for **long-term stability, peace and security in the entire region**. As stated by Commissioner Hahn, the accession perspective of

the Western Balkans is in the very interest of the European Union, since stability in its immediate neighborhood reflects directly on stability in the Union.<sup>21</sup> The example of good neighborly relations set by the Agreements with Greece and Bulgaria is a stimulus for solution of other long-standing conflicts in the region, namely the Serbia-Kosovo dispute. Only through true recognition of the progress of North Macedonia can the European Union ensure proper and complete enforcement of the historical Prespa Agreement, which serves as a pillar for stability and security that will ultimately motivate the creation of other success stories in the Western Balkans.

20 Statement by EU-Commissioner for European Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations Johannes Hahn. Available on: <https://twitter.com/JHahnEU/status/1123522423142408192>

21 Handelsblatt online. Interview with EU-Commissioner for European Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations Johannes Hahn: "Commissioner: No to Accession Negotiations Can Destabilize the Balkans" [26.04.2019]. Available on: <https://www.handelsblatt.com/dpa/konjunktur/wirtschaft-handel-und-finanzen-eu-kommissar-nein-zu-beitrittsgesprachen-kann-balkan-destabilisieren/24259512.html>

### III. IMPLICATIONS FROM STAYING IN THE EU WAITING ROOM

The European Council, on 28-29 June 2018, postponed the opening of membership negotiations with Macedonia until June 2019, on reserve of continued reform. One year later, it is undisputable that the Republic of North Macedonia has delivered on many of its commitments related to the Przhino Agreement, the Urgent Reform Priorities, and the landmark Prespa Agreement, and it continues to work and make progress on the rest.

In the scenario that the European Council fails to recognize the achievements of the country and to make a clear positive commitment by giving a green light to the start of negotiations during 2019, there would be **negative implications affecting not only the country, but also the Balkan region and the EU as a whole.**

Such an outcome is likely to shake the ground beneath the ruling government coalition and prompt the other political parties to start the blame game and possibly exert pressure for early elections. The political will to push forward the ongoing reforms would diminish, leading to the freezing or possibly even **reversal of the progress achieved so far.** This could throw the country, in the medium term, in a deeper **political instability and democratic deficit.** In the wider societal context, this scenario is very likely to lead to **increased Eurosceptic attitudes** among the ordinary citizens, who might feel that the EU is leaving them out and applying different standards to different countries.

Beyond the national borders, the stagnation in the EU accession process could also **worsen the good-neighborly relations.** The possible rise of Euroscepticism combined with **nationalistic tendencies** could negate the value of the Prespa agreement. This agreement was a huge concession that the country made in order to meet the key condition imposed by the EU for opening accession talks – solving the bilateral dispute with Greece. In the absence of a positive decision by the Council, the agreement could be presented as futile by its opponents. Overall, these tendencies could easily turn the current tide of regional progress and initiative taken by the Republic of North Macedonia to work with neighboring countries on various issues, ranging from economic and trade cooperation to some complex and difficult ones like history and culture, on which the Republic of North Macedonia has shown exceptional willingness to compromise. Instead of further cooperation, we might witness the revival of adversarial sentiments rooted in ethnic, religious, or historical differences which until recently dominated the Balkan neighborhood. An unstable Balkan region that

**The year 2019 is a turning point for the Republic of North Macedonia. Since coming to power in 2017, the government has been delivering a number of crucial achievements and ongoing reforms which show the Republic of North Macedonia's will and commitment to the EU agenda. Now is the right time to take advantage of this positive momentum, which might be lost if the start of the accession talks is further delayed.**

remains outside of the EU could pose a **threat to the European security and deter the prosperity of the continent**.

Keeping the Republic of North Macedonia away from closer EU integration could open the space for **increased meddling from other foreign powers**. Countries like Russia and Turkey have interest in the region due to historical and cultural legacy. In recent years China has placed as one of the 10 leading trading partners of the Republic of North Macedonia, and it is present in some important projects in the country, including in road infrastructure.<sup>22</sup> Even countries **with anti-EU beliefs**, such as Saudi Arabia, have expressed interest in closer economic cooperation with the Republic of North Macedonia.<sup>23</sup>

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22 <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mk.html> ; <https://telma.com.mk/avtopatot-kichevo-ohrid-ke-chini-dopolnitelni-187-milioni-evra-zashteda-od-95-milioni-evra/>

23 <https://kanal5.com.mk/articles/343108/zaev-sharaf-postoi-golem-potencijal-za-ekonomska-sorabotka-megju-makedonija-i-saudiska-arabija>



