

The road passed and new winds in the Republic of North Macedonia's foreign policy

These policy documents are developed to help the civil society organizations and, generally, the citizens, to engage in informed debate and to have access to expert knowledge, opinions and views on topics relevant for EU integrations. Areas in which the Republic of North Macedonia will lead the accession negotiations are both complex and diverse, while reforms to be taken by the country will open numerous dilemmas that require expert debates.

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After the declaration of independence in 1991, the Republic of North Macedonia clearly stressed its firm commitment for the country's full-fledged membership in the European Union and NATO as key strategic goals. By implementing long-term, comprehensive, complex and very dynamic reform process, the country has successfully positioned itself as reliable partner and strong ally to both the EU and NATO, with clear vision for its Euro-Atlantic future.

In 1992, all political parties in the Parliament had unanimously passed the declaration on the country's strategic commitment to join the EU and NATO.[1] From that moment to present, and in spite of several failed attempts to attain this strategic goal, popular support for North Macedonia's integration in the Euro-Atlantic structures remains high. According to the Standard Eurobarometer survey from 2019, almost 70% of citizens in North Macedonia favour EU membership compared to 16% that oppose, while 72% of citizens believe that the country would benefit from EU membership.[2]

North Macedonia formally declared its aspiration to become part of the Union in the early 1990s. This was confirmed by signing the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) in 2001, and the status of candidate country in 2005. The difficult reform process that was completed with the signing of landmark agreements with Greece and Bulgaria further confirms significant progress and positive steps made by the Government of RNM, which have led to thorough changes in regard to inclusive and open political ambience in the country. This significant progress was positively assessed by the EU and NATO, and was later effectuated in full-fledged NATO membership and start of accession talks with the EU.[3]

▸ Foreign and security policy of the Republic of North Macedonia and of the European Union: legislation and competent institutions

A. Legislation and competent institutions in the Republic of North Macedonia

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) is the institution competent to pursue foreign affairs and coordinate the Republic of North Macedonia's participation in the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy and the Common Security and Defence Policy. Moreover, MFA is competent to coordinate and implement Chapter 31 under the EU *acquis* within the negotiations process, which covers the Common Foreign and Security Policy.

[1] European Policy Institute (EPI), National EU Debate: Debate survey on the opportunities and challenges to Macedonia's accession in the EU, 2017, available at:

<https://epi.org.mk/docs/Materijali%20za%20informiranje%20za%20demokratija%20i%20ekonomija%20-%20Nacionalna%20debata%20za%20EU.pdf>

[2] Voice of America. Eurobarometer: 68 of the Macedonians entered the EU. August 6, 2019, available at:

<https://mk.voanews.com/a/eurobarometer-north-macedonia/5030884.html>

[3] EU Delegation in RNM, Joint statement by High Representative and Vice President of the European Commission Mogherini and Commissioner Hahn on the final parliamentary vote for implementation of the Prespa Agreement, 11 January 2019, available at:

https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/republic-north-macedonia/56434/hrvpfederica-mogherini-and-commissioner-johannes-hahn-final-parliamentary-vote-former_en

Participation in the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) is based on political commitment for shared policy objectives and priorities prior to obtaining full-fledged membership in the Union. In that, the country can actively contribute to EU efforts for promotion of global peace and stability. Hence, North Macedonia and the EU regularly hold political and expert consultations on CFSP-related issues, with a view to define joint positions on key international matters and to strengthen the country's institutional capacity for future participation in this common policy. Among others, the country's endorsement of joint declarations, statements and other legal acts of the Union is an important aspect of cooperation in this area. It should be noted that the country has achieved high level of alignment with the Union's positions, which is also observed in the EC's Country Progress Reports.[4]

As regard the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), which is an important component of the Union's foreign policy, North Macedonia contributes to attainment of joint objectives with participation (personnel and expertise) in EUFOR military operation ALTHEA (Bosnia and Herzegovina). In terms of increasing its participation in international missions led by the EU, in cooperation with the Republic of France and according to its capacity, North Macedonia participates with headquarter personnel in EUTMRCA (EU Military Training Mission in the Central African Republic).[5]

In respect to CFSP, an important role is assigned to the Ministry of Defence, which is competent and responsible for effective operation of the national defence system, as well as the country's integration in NATO and participation in the EU Common Security and Defence Policy.[6]

B. Legislation and competent institutions in the European Union

The Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) are based on legal acts, including the legally-binding international treaties, and on political documents.[7] The Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) is based on principles and is implemented according to general provisions applicable to the EU's general foreign policy. In that regard, CFSP strives to keep the peace, strengthen international security, and promote international cooperation, democracy and the rule of law, but also respect for human rights and freedoms.[8] The EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) is an integral and essential part of CFSP, and involves progressive development of the EU Common Defence Policy. Moreover, CSDP aims to enable the EU to strengthen its military capacity and deploy missions beyond EU borders to keep the peace, prevent conflicts, and enhance international security, in compliance with the principles from the Charter of the United Nations.[9]

Key institutional actors in EU foreign and security policy are the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. In particular, the High Representative is competent for coordination and implementation of both CFSP and CSDP, while in the capacity of European Commission's Vice President, he/she is tasked to ensure consistent external action by the EU.[10]

[4] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, EU Membership, available at: <https://mfa.gov.mk/en/page/6/eu-membership>

[5] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, EU Membership, available at: <https://mfa.gov.mk/en/page/6/eu-membership>

[6] Ministry of Defence, Overview of ministry competences and responsibilities, available at: http://www.mod.gov.mk/?page_id=14&lang=en

[7] Dialogue to EU, Chapter 31: Foreign, Security and Defence Policy, available at: https://dijalogkoneu.mk/chapters-all/надворешна-безбедносна-и-одбранбена/?group_id=Please%20select

[8] EUR-Lex, EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/summary/glossary/foreign_security_policy.html

[9] EUR-Lex, EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/summary/glossary/european_security_defence_policy.html

[10] EUR-Lex, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=legisum:ai0009>

The European External Action Service (EEAS), as a body established by the Lisbon Treaty and tasked with implementation of the European foreign policy, directly assists the High Representative in performance of his/her duties.[11]

As regards findings from the EC's 2019 Country Progress Report under Chapter 31: Foreign, Security and Defence Policy, it is assessed that North Macedonia continues to be moderately prepared in this area. Some progress was made during the reporting period, with continued participation in civilian and military crisis management missions. Among its key conclusions, the EC noted that during the reporting period, from beginning of March 2018 to end of February 2019, the country aligned with 75 out of 87 relevant High Representative declarations on behalf of the EU and Council decisions, representing an alignment rate of around 86%. Moreover, the country continued to actively participate in military crisis management operations under the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), notably EUFOR ALTHEA in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the NATO-led "Resolute Support" mission in Afghanistan. In the coming year, the EC recommended the country to improve alignment with EU declarations and Council decisions on the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).[12]

▸ The European Commission's new methodology for EU accession process: A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans

The European Union and its member-states expressed unequivocal support for the Western Balkans' integration in the Union as early as summits in Feira (2000) and Thessaloniki (2003). However, at the November 2019 Council Meeting, the member-states reached a joint agreement about the need to examine effectiveness of the accession process.

A key objective of the European Union's cooperation with the Western Balkans is to prepare the countries for fulfilment of all membership criteria, including support for delivery of reforms in the rule of law, democratic institutions, public administration and economic criteria, and for adoption of the European core values. Reforms in these areas will contribute to accelerated and sustainable economic growth, as well as social cohesion.

The Commission made specific proposals to enhance the accession process in general, i.e. to enhance credibility and trust of both sides and to deliver better results in the practice.

On 5 February 2010, the European Commission adopted and published the new methodology for accession in the Union, after it had been indicated that, for longer period of time, the existing methodology for accession negotiations needs to be updated.

On the occasion of publishing the new methodology, European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Oliver Varhelyi clearly noted that the EU's enlargement with the Western Balkans is a top priority of the new Commission. In particular, Commissioner Varhelyi stated that the EC is working on three tracks, firstly by proposing concrete steps to enhance the accession process. While the EC is strengthening and improving the enlargement process, the goals still remain accession and full membership in the EU. Secondly, and in parallel, the Commission stands firmly by its recommendations to open accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania, and will soon provide an update to progress made by both countries. Thirdly, in preparation for the EU-Western Balkans Summit (May 2020, Zagreb), the Commission will put forward an economic and investment development plan for the region.[13]

[11] EUR-Lex, European External Action Service (EEAS), available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=legissum:rx0013>

[12] European Commission, 2019 North Macedonia Report, 29 May 2019, available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20190529-north-macedonia-report.pdf>

[13] European Commission, Commission reports on progress made by Albania and North Macedonia, 2 March 2019, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_347

The methodology acknowledges that membership of the Western Balkans is a geostrategic investment by the EU in stable, strong and united Europe and, therefore, this proposal by the EC can be perceived as good news for the countries that demonstrate clear commitment to implement reforms under the EU accession agenda.

The new methodology is based on four pillars: greater credibility, predictability, stronger political steer, and more dynamic process. Credibility of the accession process can be reinforced through even stronger focus on fundamental reforms, especially in the rule of law, whereby when the country meets objective criteria the member-states will agree to move forward to the next stage of negotiations, pursuant to the merit-based approach. According to the EC, the accession process requires a stronger political steer, through frequent high-level political contacts, including regular summits with the Western Balkans, and more systematic monitoring of the overall process by member-states. In order to ensure a more dynamic process, the EC proposes negotiations to be led under six (6) thematic clusters: fundamentals; internal market; competitiveness and inclusive growth; green agenda and sustainable connectivity; agriculture and cohesion; and external relations. One of the main changes under the new methodology implies that negotiations for the cluster Fundamentals will be open first and closed last, with progress achieved in this cluster being monitored throughout the entire negotiations process. Also, the EC will emphasize what the country is expected to deliver in each stage of the accession process, in order to underline benefits from progress in reforms and consequences from failure to deliver progress under reforms.[14]/[15]

The accession process must be based on mutual trust, openness and clear commitments by the EU and the Western Balkans, because that is the only way to ensure sustainable reforms, fulfilment of key membership conditions, greater regional cooperation and faster integration of the countries from the region.

▸ Significant changes to foreign policy of the Republic of North Macedonia and of the European Union

A. Key steps forward in North Macedonia's foreign policy: Signing of the Prespa Agreement with Greece and the Agreement for Good-Neighbourly Relations, Friendship and Cooperation with Bulgaria

By the effect of its significant historic actions, North Macedonia managed to create a success story in the Western Balkans, especially in respect to regional reconciliation, but also in respect to fostering and promoting good-neighbourly relations. Regional cooperation and good-neighbourly relations are essential part of the EU accession process from its beginning, especially for the Western Balkans. [16] As part of the Union's policy of conditionality, this precondition has proved to be a successful tool throughout the years.

[14] European Commission, Enhancing the accession process - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans, 5 February 2020, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/enlargement-methodology_en.pdf

[15] European Commission, A more credible, dynamic, predictable and political EU accession process - Commission lays out its proposal, 5 February 2020, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_181

[16] European Commission, Conditions for EU membership, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/policy/conditions-membership_en

The Union underlined the need for resolution of bilateral issues among the Western Balkans, including North Macedonia, as precondition for the start of accession negotiations and later for EU membership. Therefore, in the recent years, resolution of bilateral disputes in the region has become an explicit and much emphasized precondition for the countries' progressive fulfilment of their strategic goals. In this context, the EC recently made unequivocally clear its view that "the EU cannot and will not import bilateral disputes and the instability they can entail".[17]

The Berlin Process, launched in 2014 by German Chancellor Angela Merkel, is an initiative aimed at stepping up cooperation between the EU and the Western Balkans, and at supporting these countries on their path to full integration in the Union.[18] As part of this process, EU candidate and prospective candidate countries specifically promised to refrain from using bilateral disputes to obstruct each other's progress on their EU integration path, while agreeing to monitor resolution of remaining bilateral challenges.[19]

For that purpose, commitment and strong desire for securing a European future for the country and its citizens have led to North Macedonia's signing of landmark agreements that allowed resolution of bilateral disputes and foster strong and sustainable regional alliances.

The Prespa Agreement, signed on 17 June 2018 between the Republic of North Macedonia and the Republic of Greece under the auspices of the United Nations, ended the long-standing dispute between the two countries and allowed North Macedonia to realize its perspectives for EU and NATO membership. In that regard, the foreign ministers from both countries signed the agreement by the effect of which the Republic of Macedonia was officially renamed as the Republic of North Macedonia.

The Prespa Agreement clearly emphasizes commitments by both parties to strengthen, widen and deepen their bilateral relations and to lay down firm foundations for entrenching and respecting good neighbourly relations, and for developing comprehensive bilateral cooperation, while seeking to reinforce and upgrade bilateral cooperation to the level of strategic partnership in areas such as political relations, defence, economy, agriculture, commerce, civil protection, energy, investments, trans-border cooperation, and transport. Moreover, it demonstrates both parties' affirmation of the need to strengthen peace, stability, security and further promote cooperation in Southeast Europe, and to strengthen the atmosphere of trust and good neighbourly relations in the region and permanently put to rest any hostile attitudes.[20]

Signing of the Prespa Agreement, with strong support from the EU, stands to testify about great concessions made by the Government, but also the citizens of North Macedonia, demonstrating the country's strong political commitment and preparedness to promote a climate of tolerance.[21] That act was welcomed by EU and NATO leaders and is described as a historic agreement that writes new pages of the EU's common future and makes an important contribution to stability and prosperity in the whole region.[22]

[17] European Council on Foreign Relations, The power of perspective: Why EU membership still matters in the Western Balkans, 7 January 2020, available at:

https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/the_power_of_perspective_why_eu_membership_still_matters_in_western_balkans

[18] Berlin Process, available at: <https://berlinprocess.info/about/#wbs-berlin-2014>

[19] European Council on Foreign Relations, The power of perspective: Why EU membership still matters in the Western Balkans, 7 January 2020, available at:

https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/the_power_of_perspective_why_eu_membership_still_matters_in_western_balkans

[20] Government of RNM, Prespa Agreement, available at:

https://vlada.mk/sites/default/files/dokumenti/konechna_sporazhenje_za_reshavanje_na_razlikite_opishani_vo_rezoluicite_817_1993_i_845_1993_na_sovetot_za_bezbednost_na_oon.pdf

[21] EU Council: Enlargement and Stabilisation and Association Process, Council Conclusions, 2018, pg. 4, available at:

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/35863/st10555-en18.pdf>

[22] Deutsche Welle (DW), "Prespa" causes an eruption of congratulations, 25 January 2019, available at: <https://www.dw.com/mk/преспа-предизвика-ерупција-од-честитки/a-47236867>

The Agreement for Good-Neighbourly Relations, Friendship and Cooperation between the Republic of Macedonia and the Republic of Bulgaria, signed in August 2017, aims to overcome bilateral disputes and promote Euro-Atlantic integrations in the region.[23]

This agreement acknowledges territorial integrity of both countries, anticipates formation of commission that will work on resolution of different views on history and promotion of economic cooperation between the two countries, and contains a commitment for protection of the rights of the other country's citizens living on their territory, without interference in internal affairs of the countries. Also, it is very important to note that this document is considered as the basis for Bulgaria's guarantees to support North Macedonia's integration in the EU and NATO.[24]

The bilateral agreement signed between North Macedonia and Bulgaria was welcomed by the EU and was assessed as inspirational and strong step forward in good-neighbourly relations, but also an indicator of both parties' decisiveness to resolve bilateral issues.[25]

It should be underlined that both agreements serve as pillar for the European future of North Macedonia, which is valued as shining example in the region for resolution of bilateral disputes.[26] However, in order to be able to feel actual benefits from signing these agreements, both parties must equally base their actions on mutual respect, understanding, openness, compromise, trust and tolerance. Only by taking actions in compliance with the European core values, bilateral relations could be further developed and could contribute to keeping regional peace and stability.

B. Benefits from significant changes in North Macedonia's foreign policy

▸ Full-fledged NATO membership

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With effectuation of its membership in the biggest military-political alliance, North Macedonia has achieved its strategic goal defined since the independence in 1991 - full-fledged membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

North Macedonia is considered a long-standing ally and contributor to Euro-Atlantic security, including through active participation in NATO-led missions in Afghanistan and Kosovo.[27]

[23] *The Economist*, Macedonia and Bulgaria sign friendship treaty, 9 August 2017, available at: http://country.eiu.com/article.aspx?articleid=525768236&Country=Macedonia&topic=Politics&subtopic_5

[24] *Balkan Insight*, Macedonia approves landmark friendship treaty with Bulgaria, 15 January 2018, available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/01/15/macedonia-approves-landmark-friendship-treaty-with-bulgaria-01-15-2018/>

[25] *Akademik*, Agreement for Good-Neighbourly Relations, Friendship and Cooperation signed between Macedonia and Bulgaria, 1 August 2017, available at: <https://akademik.mk/potpishan-dogovorot-za-dobrososedstvo-prijateljstvo-i-sorabotka-megu-makedonija-i-bugarija/>

[26] Government of RNM, PM Spasovski an EP President Sassoli: Successful reforms and the new methodology are important steps for start of EU accession negotiations with North Macedonia soon, 18 February 2020, available at: <https://vlada.mk/node/20275>

360 Degrees. State Department: North Macedonia's accession to NATO is an example for future aspirant countries, 27 March 2020. <https://360stepeni.mk/stejt-department-chlenstvoto-na-severna-makedonija-vo-nato-e-primer-za-idnite-aspiranti/>

North Macedonia's road to NATO membership was neither fast nor easy. The country's cooperation with NATO started in December 1993 when the Parliament of the Republic of North Macedonia adopted the Resolution on the Republic of Macedonia's Accession to NATO. In November 1995, the country became member of the Partnership for Peace (PfP); in June 1996, RM's Liaison Office with NATO was formed, followed by establishment of RM's Mission to NATO in Brussels in November 1997. In April 1999, at the NATO Summit in Washington, North Macedonia officially became a candidate country for membership in the Alliance. In April 2008, at the NATO Summit in Bucharest, the country was closest to realising this strategic goal, having in mind confirmation of its progress in fulfilment of membership criteria, but was not presented with invitation to join NATO. Summit Conclusions noted that the country will be invited to join the Alliance after it finds a mutually acceptable solution to the name dispute with the Republic of Greece. Once the dispute with Greece was resolved with the signing of the Prespa Agreement in June 2018, as early as 11 July 2018, at the NATO Summit in Brussels, North Macedonia was officially invited to start accession negotiations for NATO membership.

On 6 February 2019, in Brussels, permanent representatives from all 29 member-states of NATO signed the Accession Protocol of the Republic of North Macedonia. This was followed by ratification of the Accession Protocol by national parliaments and institutions of member-states. Hence, all 29 national parliaments adopted acts for ratification of the Accession Protocol, with Spain being the last one to ratify this protocol in the Senate, during a virtual session held under circumstances of state of emergency due to the coronavirus pandemic.

On 27 March 2020, North Macedonia became the new 30th member of NATO after it deposited the instrument of accession to the U.S. State Department in Washington.

The press-release published by the State Department on that occasion noted that North Macedonia's NATO accession represents the culmination of many years of effort by the government and the people of North Macedonia. Moreover, it ascertained that North Macedonia's NATO membership will support greater integration, democratic reform, trade, security, and stability across the region.[28]

The ceremony for raising North Macedonia's flag was held on 30 March at the NATO Headquarters, i.e. the Allied Command Operations Headquarters in SHARE – Mons and the Allied Command Transformation in Norfolk, Virginia, with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and members of North Macedonia's delegation in attendance.[29]

▸ Start of accession negotiations with the European Union

The European Commission first recommended opening of accession negotiations with the Republic of North Macedonia in October 2009. In 2015 and 2016, this recommendation was conditioned with continued and successful implementation of the Przhino Agreement and significant progress in implementation of the Urgent Reform Priorities.

In June 2018, the Council adopted positive conclusions on progress made, which allowed the country to get closer to possible opening of accession talks in June 2019. More specifically, in June 2019, the Council discussed the European Commission's Enlargement Strategy and North Macedonia Progress Report from 29 May 2019.

[28] *360 Degrees*, State Department: North Macedonia's accession reaffirms open doors to NATO for other aspirants, 27 March 2020, available at: <https://360stepeni.mk/stejt-department-chlenstvoto-na-severna-makedonija-vo-nato-e-primer-za-idnite-aspiranti/>

[29] Ministry of Defence, Road to NATO, available at: http://www.mod.gov.mk/?page_id=1960&lang=mk

Having in mind the importance of this matter and limited time for its reconsideration, the Council decided to revisit the issue of opening accession negotiations with RNM in October 2019 the latest, to take its clear and crucial decision.

On 15 October 2019, the Council discussed enlargement and stabilisation and association process with Albania and Republic of North Macedonia. After discussions, the Finish EU Presidency adopted procedural conclusions, underlying that the General Affairs Council (GAC) will discuss this matter after the European Council in October,[30] but the European Council held on 17-18 October 2019 yet again decided to revisit the enlargement issue before the EU-Western Balkans Summit, in May 2020, in Zagreb.[31]

After almost 15 years of candidate-country status and 10 consecutive recommendations from the European Commission to open accession negotiations, North Macedonia was again denied date to start accession negotiations with the EU. The reason behind the failure to reach consensual agreement among EU member-states was the veto by French President Emanuel Macron due to the need for changes in the negotiations process which, in his opinion, should be clear and reversible instead of technocratic and non-transparent.[32]

European high representatives, including former Enlargement Commission Johannes Hahn, interpreted the decision not to start negotiations with North Macedonia as historic error, with former President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker assessing that the veto is shameful and betrays promises made to the country.[33]

Immediately after non-delivery of date to start negotiations, the former Prime Minister Zoran Zaev announced organization of early parliamentary elections within the shortest deadline possible. At the leadership meeting held on 20 October on the initiative by President Stevo Pendarovski and attended by leaders of major political parties, a consensus was reached to hold the elections on 12 April 2020, including unanimous confirmation of North Macedonia's EU integrations as option with no alternatives.[34] However, due to the situation caused by the coronavirus, at the meeting held in Villa "Vodno" on 17 March, the leaders of political parties reached an agreement to postpone the early parliamentary elections that were initially scheduled for 12 April.

Nevertheless, EU activities geared towards the start of accession talks continued actively. The European Commission's revised enlargement methodology was adopted in February. Consequently, on 2 March 2020, the European Commission published an update report for North Macedonia on the basis of which the European Council was tasked, on 26 March, to take a decision for opening accession negotiations with the country. The report presented key novelties related to progress in regard to the rule of law, with special accent on reforms achieved in key areas from the June 2018 Council Conclusions, i.e. judiciary, security and intelligence services, public administration reform, and fight against organized crime and corruption.[35] In particular, the report noted evident and sustainable track-record in key reform areas and good neighbourly relations, as well as that the recommendation to start negotiations with the country from 2019 remains valid.[36]

[30] EU Council, Enlargement and Stabilisation and Association Process – Albania and the Republic of North Macedonia, Presidency Conclusions, 15 October 2019, available at: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-13155-2019-INIT/en/pdf>

[31] EU Council, European Council Conclusions, 17-18 October 2019, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/41123/17-18-euco-final-conclusions-en.pdf>

[32] *Vecer*, Macron: I don't like the term "French veto", many states opposed North Macedonia, 15 February 2020, available at: <https://www.vecer.mk/node/477356>

[33] MIA, MKD-EU 2019: Instead of promised date, the country received a non-paper for new method of negotiations, 2 January 2020, available at: <https://mia.mk/mkd-eu-2019-namesto-veteniot-datum-zem-ava-dobi-non-pe-per-za-nov-nachin-na-pregovara-e/>

[34] MIA, MKD-EU 2019: Instead of promised date, the country received a non-paper for new method of negotiations, 2 January 2020, available at: <https://mia.mk/mkd-eu-2019-namesto-veteniot-datum-zem-ava-dobi-non-pe-per-za-nov-nachin-na-pregovara-e/>

[35] EU Council, Enlargement and Stabilisation and Association Process, Council Conclusions, 26 June 2018, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/35863/st10555-en18.pdf>

[36] *Telma*, Positive report from EC for Macedonia, but uncertain date for negotiations, 6 March 2020, available at: <https://arhiva.telma.com.mk/pozitiven-izveshtaj-od-ek-za-makedonija-no-se-ushte-neizvesen-datmot-za-pregovori/>

After strenuous talks, all 27 member-states agreed that current progress under the reform process and fulfilment of membership criteria are sufficient to open the accession negotiations.[37] On 24 March 2020, the Ministers of European Affairs reached a political agreement to start accession negotiations with Albania and the Republic of North Macedonia. EU Council's green light for North Macedonia was given virtually, at the video conference, due to the coronavirus pandemic. This implied recognition of the country's reform efforts and demonstration of clear political determination to move forward on its European path.[38]

On 25 March, as part of a written procedure, conclusions on enlargement and stabilisation and association process were formally adopted and were approved by members of the European Council on 26 March 2020.

In the second half of September 2018, the country formally started the screening process in preparation for EU accession negotiations, with the start of the so-called explanatory screening. In the first stage of screening, EU representatives elaborated on membership obligations to be assumed by the country. In the second stage, as part of more voluminous and complex bilateral screening, Macedonian administration will have to report before the European institutions and member-states on achievements thus far. The explanatory screening for all 33 chapters under EU *acquis* was finalized in December 2019.

By green lighting the start of accession negotiations with the EU in March 2020, the Ministers of European Affairs in the Union decided that the EC should immediately start drafting the negotiating framework for accession talks between the EU and North Macedonia (same obligation is given to member-states). It is expected for the European Commission to present the negotiating framework for North Macedonia on 3 June, together with updated country report for 2020. The negotiating framework contains the principles on the basis of which negotiations will be conducted between the EU and North Macedonia, and prior to its adoption it needs to be consensually accepted by all EU member-states. However, given that the COVID-19 virus pandemic has changed the dynamics of decision-making at the Union level, the date for opening the first chapter, i.e. the date for organization of the first intergovernmental conference, cannot be anticipated with certainty. In case the negotiating framework is presented in June and is green lighted by EU member-states in the autumn, the first intergovernmental conference could take place by the end of this year the latest. [39] Encouraging is the fact that opening of accession negotiations with North Macedonia would start during the German EU Presidency, a country considered to be great supporter of North Macedonia's aspirations for EU membership. Also, finalisation of the negotiating framework during the Croatian EU Presidency would be another positive signal, as this country strongly supports integration in the EU of North Macedonia and the whole region.

[37] EU Council, Enlargement and Stabilisation and Accession Process – North Macedonia and Albania, Council Conclusions, 25 March 2020, available at: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7002-2020-INIT/en/pdf>

[38] EU Council, Video conference of the Ministers for European Affairs, 24 March 2020, available at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/gac/2020/03/24/?fbclid=IwAR04L9xCmwgAWfEQtd8Eo7mX5zB9zphp8gSw41vSBJ58asfJ9rHYro_olZI

[39] Fokus, Pisonero: Negotiating framework for North Macedonia expected in June, 29 April 2020, available at: <https://fokus.mk/pisonero-ochekuvame-pregovarackata-ramka-za-makedonija-da-ja-prezentirame-vo-juni/>

▸ Conclusions: What are the next steps that will lead closer to full-fledged EU membership?

The Republic of North Macedonia's membership in the EU and NATO is paramount strategic priority of the country's foreign policy, supported by general political and party consensus, including widespread popular support.[40] Hence, a state-level priority of the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia is for the country to be sovereign, respected and prosperous international entity with clear vision for realization of its paramount strategic goals.[41]

North Macedonia demonstrated maturity and preparedness to start accession talks with the EU, having achieved great success in overcoming bilateral disputes with its neighbours, and timely and quality delivery of reforms in key areas.[42]

The European project was created as a project for bringing and keeping the peace and stability in Europe, and for close cooperation among countries at bilateral and regional level.

As regards good-neighbourly relations and regional cooperation as key factors that contribute to sustained stability and peace, it could be said with great certainty that these are viewed as key actions taken by the “shining example of the Balkans” – North Macedonia.

Integration in the European Union requires decisiveness, will and courage, maximum investment of joint efforts and making essential systemic reform decisions as part of supra-party dialogue, in order to accept European democratic values such as the rule of law, respect and promotion of human rights, and enhancing democratic institutions. Also, EU membership brings major economic benefits for North Macedonia and the whole region, through integration in the Union's single market, creating favourable business climate and attracting foreign investments, as well as reducing unemployment and drain-brain. It is important to underline that NATO membership, as North Macedonia's strategic and security objective, will positively affect the stability and prosperity of the whole region.

Alignment of national policy with the European foreign policy could serve as key indicator for the country's geostrategic orientation and its preparedness to accept the European views and values. The degree of North Macedonia's foreign and security alignment with corresponding European policies is increased in the last three years, through significant changes made by the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia as a result of the revision to the country's foreign policy and resolution of the dispute with Greece.

The French veto to start negotiations with North Macedonia from October 2019 had an important effect on the momentum for resolution of bilateral issues among the Western Balkans. The Union's revised enlargement methodology, proposed by France, reinvigorated the process to some extent, but it still anticipates significantly slower dynamics in the forthcoming period compared to previous enlargement waves.

Nevertheless, the EU perspective remains the strongest incentive for North Macedonia and for the countries in the region to implement comprehensive and sustainable reforms, to resolve any disputes with their neighbours and to ensure national and regional development.

[40] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, NATO Membership, available at: <https://mfa.gov.mk/page/7/nato-chlenstvo>

[41] Government of RNM, Republic of North Macedonia – Member of NATO and the European Union, available at: <https://vlada.mk/node/18041?ln=mk>

[42] SEA, North Macedonia shows maturity and preparedness for start of negotiations with the Union, 8 May 2019, available at: <http://www.sep.gov.mk/content/?ID=2463#.XptETy17EXo>

The EU's green light to opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia could be considered not only as procedure that managed to maintain the Union's credibility in the region, but a test passed by the EU for fair and just recognition of results and implementation of its geopolitical ambitions in the practice. Such decision by the EU at times of major challenges and under the current situation caused by the coronavirus pandemic, has shown that the Union managed to remain focused on making key strategic decisions at bilateral and regional level.[43]

The past period, dominated by implementation of measures aimed to deal with the coronavirus, is major indicator about why it is especially important for North Macedonia to have close relations established with the Union. In addition to start of accession negotiations, the country received financial assistance from the EU to deal with the pandemics, embodying great symbolism of European solidarity and support for the countries that are building and strengthening their institutions.[44]

In essence, democratic reforms are at the heart of the Union's enlargement policy. Hence, it is of exceptional importance for the Union to continue to demonstrate its commitment for full integration of the Western Balkans in the EU, thus encouraging the countries to cooperate and to overcome unresolved disputes by means of dialogue which, in its own right, will allow greater fulfilment of membership criteria and faster integration in the Union.

A credible perspective for full-fledged and merit-based EU membership is of political, security and economic interest for the Union. At times of numerous global challenges and divisions, this commitment will be increasingly featured as geostrategic investment in a strong, stable and united Europe.[45]

[43] *A1on*, North Macedonia starts negotiations for EU membership, 15 March 2020, available at: <https://a1on.mk/macedonia/s-makedonija-gi-zapochnuva-pregovorate-za-chlenstvo-so-eu/>

[44] European Council on Foreign Relations, Finally some good news: Albania and North Macedonia on the road to EU membership, 6 April 2020, available at: https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_finally_some_good_news_albania_and_north_macedonia_on_the_road_t

[45] European Commission, A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans, 2018, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/enlargement-methodology_en.pdf

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