

Macedonia's Stalled Bid for EU Membership: Is the Solution in Sight?

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Abstract: *The narrative for Macedonia's EU accession efforts is basically about a stalled process for the best part of the last years. Although the Commission has recommended starting accession talks for several years in a row, Greek objections blocked progress, however, just as they did at the Bucharest NATO summit when Greece prevented Macedonia from joining NATO. In June 2018, following the withdrawal of the Greek veto as a part of the agreement to change the country's name to the Republic of North Macedonia, the European ministers have decided that Macedonia's EU accession talks will start in June 2019, provided a string of conditions are met. While some Member States expressed concerns about corruption and the rule of law in Macedonia (and Albania), the others have decided to support expansion for geopolitical reasons and to counter the rising Russian and Chinese influence in the Western Balkans. The aim of this paper is to critically evaluate the credibility of the EU enlargement process and the overall state of play in the formal accession of Macedonia including, for example, the progress in resolving a decades-old name dispute, and other indicators in alignment with the overall *acquis* and performance in terms of trade integration.*

Keywords: *Macedonia, EU, Enlargement, accession talks, *acquis*, trade integration*

1. Introduction: What's in a name of Macedonia?

The Western Balkan countries share a common heritage and history with the peoples of EU Member States and a future defined by shared challenges and opportunities. In the aftermath of post-communist transitions, through which most Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries embarked on a process of thorough economic and political reform and structural change, the Balkans continued to be marked by a series of ethnic conflicts, succession wars and circles of instability. The region's peace and prosperity are an important goal for the EU, whilst the European perspective of the Western Balkans remains a foremost priority to achieving this goal. In order to specify the requirements for progress of the South Eastern Europe (SEE or later, the

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Western Balkans), the EU defined a regional policy approach (1996), that is regional cooperation and EU conditionality strategy (1997) which contained political and economic preconditions for developing bilateral relations. “However, it turned out that the consequences of the bitter conflicts that happened in the Balkans were complex and deep, and that the political climate in some countries in the region was not ready for a fast track EU accession together with the CEE countries, with the exception of the Republic of Macedonia”.² The latter has developed its own path in the process commencing a regular political dialogue with the EU.

After the ethnic breakdown of the Kosovo crisis and the NATO intervention in Serbia, the EU's rather unclear promises crystalized in a new mechanism – the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP) – that was officially launched in 2000 as a complement to the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe. While the Stability Pact was designed as a framework for regional cooperation, the SAP was intended to provide a functioning political and legal framework for a series of (parallel) bilateral political, economic and trade relations between the EU and SEE countries.³ The key elements of SAP included a new generation of stabilization and association agreements and the new financial instrument CARDS (2000-2006) to support the implementation of reforms needed to join the EU. In 2003, at the Thessaloniki Summit, the Stabilization and Association Process was further upgraded and the European perspective of Western Balkans reaffirmed by the European Council, declaring that “the future of the Balkans is in the European Union”.

Fast forward to 2018 and Macedonia has been surpassed by a number of other Western Balkan countries. The Commission adopted a strategy for “A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans”, confirming the European future of the region as a geostrategic investment in a united, strong and stable Europe based on common values.⁴ The Strategy clarifies the steps necessary for Montenegro and Serbia to complete the accession process at the horizon of 2025; Montenegro (since June 2012) and Serbia (since January 2014) are the two countries with which accession talks are already under way, despite not having even been separate countries when Macedonia's application bid was made. The country was granted a candidate status in 2005, but more than a decade later it remains a candidate only.

Macedonia, whilst not sharing the severity of state-building problems of Bosnia and Herzegovina or even Serbia and Kosovo, is of course held up by a serious external constraint on its status. The name issue and core problem of the Greek stance dates back

⁰ D. Tilev (ed.), *Ten Years of the Enactment of the Stabilization and Association Agreement*, Skopje, Secretariat for European Affairs (SEA), 2015.

³ H. Ciurtin, “Left Behind? Reassessing the Balkan Quest for EU Integration”, *European Institute of Romania, Policy Briefs Series*, No. 2, 2017, <http://www.ier.ro/en/news/policy-brief-no-2-left-behind-reassessing-balkan-quest-eu-integration.html>, (accessed 10 March 2018).

⁴ European Commission, “Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions”, *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, (accessed 10 March 2018).

to the point of Macedonia's independence from Yugoslavia in 1991. Since then, it has been an ongoing issue in bilateral and international relations. The country was admitted as a member in various international organizations, such as the United Nations, under the temporary denomination of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, but calls itself the Republic of Macedonia, a name that is challenged by Greece. The dispute arose after the break-up of Yugoslavia in 1991, when the name of the newly independent state was chosen. Greece did not acknowledge the constitutional name "Republic of Macedonia" claiming that its name, symbol and constitution belong to its cultural heritage and imply territorial claims to the neighbouring Greek province of Macedonia. The conflict intensified in 1993 when Macedonia incorporated the Vergina Sun into its flag, a symbol found among the tombs of the ancient kings of Macedon. Consequently, Greece decided to impose a trade embargo on Macedonia.⁵ An interim agreement signed in 1995 resolved this aspect of the dispute; Macedonia removed the symbol from its flag and allegedly irredentist clauses from its constitution, whilst both sides committed to continuing negotiations on the name issue under the UN auspices. For its part, Greece agreed that it would not object Macedonia's accession to international organizations of which Greece was itself a member, so long as it would accede under the name of "former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia". Greece has since become a close economic partner and one of the largest foreign investors in Macedonia.⁶ However, the name issue has not been resolved, despite UN mediation. A number of countries have recognized Macedonia under its constitutional name, but this was of little help for the country to achieve its most important foreign policy goals. In December 2009, Greece vetoed the start of Macedonia's EU accession negotiations, just as they did at the Bucharest NATO summit in April 2008 when Greece prevented Macedonia from joining NATO. In point of fact, the necessary resolution of the "name issue" was imposed by the Council as an additional criterion (outside the Copenhagen criteria) for the start of accession talks, effectively blocking the accession of Macedonia to the European Union.⁷

The story for Macedonia's EU accession endeavour is basically about a stalled process for the best part of the last years. Unlike the other post-communist countries of CEE and the Western Balkans, Macedonia has faced an additional obstacle on the road to EU membership. This very hurdle was not made only by the already demanding process of political and economic transition, nor by the standards and values of the EU, which were often found to be just as difficult to accept by other candidate countries. Given the above considerations, this paper looks at various dimensions of Macedonia's relations with the EU and attempts to appraise critically the foremost problems and challenges the country is facing along the path towards EU membership. Without undervaluing the importance of the other objective difficulties, more or less experienced by the other candidates, special attention is placed on recent political developments in the

⁵ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, "Investment Policy Review: the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia", *United Nations, New York and Geneva*, 2012, http://unctad.org/en/PublicationsLibrary/diaepcb2011d3_en.pdf, (accessed 10 January 2018).

⁶ ESI, *European Stability Initiative*, 2012, <http://www.esiweb.org/index.php?lang=en&id=562>, (accessed 10 January 2018).

⁷ I. Milchevski, "A Requiem for a Dream: The Name Issue and the Accession of Macedonia to the EU", *International Issues and Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs*, vol. 22, no. 4, 2013, pp. 40-59.

country and the naming dispute, which has appeared to ultimately define the dynamics of Macedonia's EU integration. The rest of the paper is organized as follows. The second section summarizes the evolution of Macedonia's relation with the EU since independence. The third section examines the critical latest developments in Macedonia – the growing Russian and Chinese influence in the region, the recent political crisis in the country, the resolved name dispute with Greece and the EU's response thereafter. The fourth section looks at assessments of the state of play in Macedonia, at least according to the European Commission. The fifth section discusses whether the delay in commencing negotiations is impacting on Macedonia's economic progress, focusing on trade integration with the EU. The article ends with some concluding remarks.

2. Macedonia and the EU: A country stuck in an endless waiting room

The dispute with Greece has delayed the beginnings of the Macedonia's formal relations with EU. Back in 1997, the country and the then European Community (EC) signed a Cooperation Agreement, and an agreement on trade and transport intended for promoting the economic and political cooperation. In the late 1990s, Macedonia joined the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP), as an EU's policy towards the Western Balkans. The fundamentals of SAP refer to the new generation of stabilization and association agreements and the new financial instrument CARDS (2000-2006) to support the implementation of reforms needed to join the EU. Macedonia was actually the first country in the region that signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) in 2001, which entered into force in 2004. Since then, Macedonia's EU accession bid has been defined as the highest strategic priority and the membership has served as a point of consensus among the political parties. Alongside the procedural and technical commitments and criteria for accession to the EU, Macedonia has also started with the process of gradual political reconciliation. One of the boldest reforms was the process set out by the Ohrid Framework Agreement that was signed on 13 August 2001. This agreement ended the armed conflict between the Macedonian security forces and the parliamentary Albanian National Liberation Army. The ten points of the Agreement have actually provided foundation for a new power-sharing system and internal restructuring of Macedonia.⁸ The SAA is a complex and legally binding act, which, in political terms, has placed Macedonia among the countries with prospects for EU membership, while in economic terms, it has provided an access to one of the largest and most powerful markets in the world. The signing of SAA has also provided an impetus to accelerate the restructuring of the Macedonian economy and adapt the country to new market conditions. As a preferential agreement, the SAA was also intended to support the economic and political stability of the country and the region (stabilization) and to establish a stable political and economic link with the EU Member States (association).

The reforms undertaken within the SAA framework, as well as the arrangements with the IMF and World Bank have created conditions for Macedonia to apply for EU

⁸ D. Marolov, "Understanding the Ohrid Framework Agreement", in Ramet S.P., Listhaug O., Simkus A. (eds), *Civic and Uncivic Values in Macedonia*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, pp. 134-154.

membership. After a short but intensive public debate and the adoption of parliamentary declaration supporting the submission, Macedonia has officially applied for EU membership on 22 March 2004 in Dublin, during the Irish Presidency of the EU Council. In May that year, the Commission was mandated to prepare the Opinion and in October 2004 the questionnaire was handed over to the Macedonian authorities. The preparation of questionnaire responses was the first serious test of Macedonia's administrative capacity. The answers were completed by February 2005 and, based on information provided here as well as the one collected from other sources, the Commission has provided a favourable opinion on Macedonia's application for EU membership. The European Council granted the status of candidate country to Macedonia in December 2005. Unfortunately, no date for the start of accession negotiations was given.⁹ In 2006, the Council adopted the "European Partnership" for Macedonia providing the framework for intensification of the accession-related reform programme and linking the allocation of EU financial assistance (at that time the CARDS programme) to the reform priorities identified in the regular European Commission reports produced as part of the SAP.¹⁰ In February 2008, the Council adopted Accession Partnership for Macedonia, updating the 2006 European Partnership and key benchmarks were defined as conditions for further progress in the process. In the meantime, a new tool was defined to support reforms in the "enlargement countries" with financial and technical help, viz. the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) which, for the period 2007-2013, had a budget of some € 11.5 billion.¹¹

Two particularly significant developments occurred in 2009. First, in July, the Commission proposed to grant visa liberalization to the country, which subsequently entered into force on 19 December that year following the necessary Council of Ministers decision. Second, the Commission recommended for the first time that membership negotiations with Macedonia be launched. Greek objections blocked progress however, just as they did at the Bucharest NATO summit in April 2008 when Greece vetoed Macedonia's accession to NATO. In October 2012, the European Commission recommended for the fourth consecutive year that accession negotiations with Macedonia be started. On each previous occasion the start of EU entry talks had been vetoed by Greece. In 2012, Bulgaria also utilized its veto. Relations between Macedonia and Bulgaria have been influenced by conflicting views about history. The progress of bilateral relations was grounded on main concerns for regional development and cooperation in South Eastern Europe, as well as the shared interests of both countries for EU membership. After this period of isolation and supporting negativism between the two countries, history will mark the year of 1999 as particularly important for bilateral cooperation and dialogue. Namely, the Joint Declaration of 22 February 1999 has established bilateral process of resolving the long-lasting political and historic dispute, and opened the doors for new stages in the field of commerce, political and

⁹ Tilev, *Ten Years of the Enactment of the Stabilization and Association Agreement*.

¹⁰ M. Dangerfield and O. Kostoska, "Integrating the Country that Cannot Say its Own Name: The EU and Macedonia", *UACES 44th Annual Conference*, Cork, Ireland, 2014.

¹¹ O. Kostoska et al., "EU Regional Policy and Pre-Accession Support for the Republic of Macedonia", *International Balkan and Near Eastern Social Sciences Congress Series (IBANESS)*, Ohrid, Macedonia, 2017, pp. 401-413.

cultural cooperation.¹² Another positive step forward in the relations between the two countries was achieved in 2011 by signing the Memorandum of Cooperation in the field of EU integration. It provides access to lessons learned from Bulgaria's accession process with the goal of strengthening the administrative capacity in Macedonia. Yet, the media continued with periodical reports on events in inter-state relations and that Bulgaria is considering the possibility to condition its support for Macedonia's EU membership. Hence, one may not get surprised with Bulgaria's position in 2012 to veto the Macedonia's opening of EU accession talks in spite of a recommendation by the European Commission that membership negotiations be launched.¹³ High-profile contacts with Bulgaria intensified and there was a strong belief that sending positive public messages would reinforce the cooperation and make for reducing the stereotypes.

Though formal EU negotiations with Macedonia have been on hold for the last years, some forward progress in Macedonia's readiness for EU entry has occurred. This has certainly been through the SAA and Accession Partnership, but also through the High Level Accession Dialogue (HLAD). The HLAD was launched by the European Commission in March 2012 with the aim of maintaining the speed of reforms and implementing the National Programme for Adoption of the Acquis. The HLAD covers five specific issues, which are as follows: freedom of expression, rule of law and ethnic relations, challenges for electoral reform, public administration reform, strengthening of the market economy and good neighbourly relations.¹⁴ The main objectives in the areas covered by the HLAD are summarized in Table 1.¹⁵

Table 1: Objectives in the areas covered by the HLAD

AREA	OBJECTIVES
1. Media – Freedom of expression and professional standards	Decriminalization of slander and insult and to this end a law is being drafted on civil accountability for damaging the repute of others by way of slander or insult.
2. Rule of law and fundamental rights	Judiciary (efficiency, professionalism and independence); fighting corruption and interethnic relations.

¹² Institute for Regional and International Studies, *Perspectives on the Development of the Relations between Bulgaria and Macedonia*, 1999, http://pdc.ceu.hu/archive/00002440/01/perspectives_on_the_development.pdf, (accessed 15 January 2018).

¹³ Dangerfield and Kostoska, "Integrating the Country that Cannot Say its Own Name: The EU and Macedonia".

¹⁴ European Commission, "The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 2012 Progress Report", Brussels, 2012, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/key_documents/2012/package/mk_rapport_2012_en.pdf, (accessed 10 March 2018).

¹⁵ "Macedonian Diplomatic Bulletin", *Macedonian Information Centre*, May 2012, No. 61, <http://www.mfa.gov.mk/images/stories/MKD-BILTEN/61/MDB-61-web.pdf>, (accessed 10 March 2018).

3. Public Administration Reform	Improving the management of human resources, improving the framework for administrative procedures and continuing the process of decentralization.
4. Electoral reform	Completing the reform of the election legislation, taking into consideration the recommendations of the OSCE with the aim of righting the flaws of the previous elections.
5. Strengthening the market economy	Achieving a dynamic economic growth; considerable effort to improve the labour and education market and the business environment and to enhance the making of the economic policy and its implementation.

Source: https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2014/07/07/the-high-level-accession-dialogue-and-macedonia/#_ftn12

Taking a note of the results, the Commission has concluded that “in the absence of the negotiation process, the main *fora* for discussion and monitoring of reforms are the bodies established under the SAA as well as the High Level Accession Dialogue (HLAD) established in 2012. The HLAD has contributed to progress in most priority areas. The progress being made under HLAD will offer the country a good position when negotiations will eventually begin. However, it is not, and cannot be, a substitute for moving to the opening of accession negotiations”.¹⁶ Hence, opening the membership negotiations remains the primary goal of Macedonia and the European Commission.¹⁷

3. Russian meddling and Chinese Interest – an alarm bell for the EU?

The 2013 Progress Report noted the impact of the political crisis involving the forcible removal of a large number of opposition MPs and journalists from the Parliament chamber in December 2012 during the adoption of the 2013 annual budget under controversial circumstances. The opposition boycotted parliament and threatened a boycott of the local elections. The protracted stalemate was resolved through the implementation of the 1 March 2013 political agreement. The 1 March political agreement also required a Committee of Inquiry and a Memorandum of Understanding, confirming the cross-party consensus on, and commitment to, the country’s strategic objective of the Euro-Atlantic integration. As well as a reminder of the potential for inter-ethnic flare-ups, this episode also illustrated the important role

¹⁶ European Commission, “The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 2013 Progress Report”, Brussels, 2013, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/key_documents/2013/package/brochures/the_former_yugoslav_republic_of_macedonia_2013.pdf, (accessed 10 March 2018).

¹⁷ Macedonian Diplomatic Bulletin.

that the EU played in pressurising both sides into reaching an agreement to pursue a constructive solution. Meanwhile, Macedonia, under IPA II, continues to benefit from pre-accession assistance over the period 2014-20, with total indicative funding of €664 million. IPA II assistance will be focused to supporting the reform efforts in the field of the rule of law and governance, and growth and competitiveness.¹⁸

In 2015, Macedonia has faced its worst political crisis since 2001. The disruptive political culture, breakdown in dialogue and lack of capacity for compromise evolved into a continuing and protracted political crisis, including a boycott of parliament by the main opposition party and further erosion of trust in public institutions. The crisis developed further with the publication of intercepted conversations involving senior government and governing party officials suggesting breaches of fundamental rights, media freedom and elections, interference with judicial independence, and politicization and corruption in different areas.¹⁹ In response, the Commission presented a text about “Urgent Reform Priorities” to address the underlying rule of law issues. In parallel, the Commissioner and three members of the European Parliament facilitated a political agreement reached between the four main political leaders in June/July (Pržino agreement). Based on this agreement, Members of Parliament of the main opposition party returned to parliament on 1 September after having boycotted it for more than a year. This boycott severely affected the supervisory function of the institution over the executive branch. Under the High Level Accession Dialogue, work was carried on a new table of targets, accompanied by the “Urgent Reform Priorities”. In November 2015, the Commission stated that it was prepared to extend its recommendation to open the accession talks, conditional on the continued implementation of the June/July political agreement and substantial progress in the implementation of the “Urgent Reform Priorities”. The agreements and important decisions taken in summer 2016 have broken the ground for early parliamentary elections and provided an opportunity for Macedonia’s leaders to conclude the long-lasting crisis and address systematic issues.²⁰ Now that the country has emerged from this political crisis, expectations are high that it will get back on a track. Striving to demonstrate that the EU is indeed a strategic priority for the country, the new Government has engaged in resetting the prospects for EU integration and promoting friendly bilateral talks with neighbouring countries. In August 2017, followed by a great deal of public discussions and speculations, Macedonia signed a friendship accord with Bulgaria in an attempt to improve ties between the Balkan neighbours and revive efforts to join the EU and NATO.²¹ The attempts for the resolution of naming dispute gained a new momentum, whilst Macedonia seemed determined to end the row with Greece over its name. After initial signs of a possible

¹⁸ Kostoska et al., “EU Regional Policy and Pre-Accession Support for the Republic of Macedonia”, pp. 401-413.

¹⁹ European Commission, “The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Report 2015”, Brussels, 2015, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/key_documents/2015/20151110_report_the_former_yugoslav_republic_of_macedonia.pdf, (accessed 10 March 2018).

²⁰ European Commission, “The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 2016 Report”, Brussels, 2016, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/key_documents/2016/20161109_report_the_former_yugoslav_republic_of_macedonia.pdf, (accessed 10 March 2018).

²¹ S. Okov, “Republic of Macedonia Mends Ties With Bulgaria Eyeing EU”, *Bloomberg Politics*, 1 August 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-08-01/bulgaria-republic-of-macedonia-sign-accord-to-repair-relations>, (accessed 1 September 2018).

breakthrough earlier this year, in **June 2018** the country reached a deal with Greece to change its name to the **Republic of North Macedonia** and put an end to a decades-long dispute. The new name will be used for all purposes (internationally, bilaterally and domestically), so that even those countries that have recognized the name Macedonia will also have to adopt North Macedonia.²² The accord, which has been contested by nationalists on both sides of the border, must be ratified by the parliaments of both countries and also put to a referendum in Macedonia. **A referendum was held on 30 September 2018**, with voters asked whether they are in favour of EU and NATO membership by accepting the agreement between Macedonia and Greece. The referendum failed to secure the 50 percent turnout required to make the vote valid. The people who did vote massively backed the name change – more than 90 percent voted ‘yes’. But, this has never been in doubt, because the opponents of the change had urged followers not to vote, rather than vote ‘no’.²³ Being consultative, as well as including constitutional changes, the referendum’s result still must be ratified by a two-thirds parliamentary majority. The Western leaders welcomed the result as positive, despite the low turnout. The European Commissioner for Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations said that the votes ‘for’ at the referendum were “significant” and urged Macedonia’s political leaders to “respect this decision and take it forward with utmost responsibility and unity across party lines, in the interest of the country”. Meanwhile, Greece has agreed to stop blocking Macedonia’s bid to join the EU and NATO, provided that the country completes its promised constitutional changes.

As a matter of fact, senior officials from both the EU and NATO were prompt to welcome the agreement. The two countries have been in a race to agree on a settlement before the EU summit in late June and NATO summit scheduled for mid-July 2018. After Greece and Macedonia resolved the dispute about the latter’s name which had blocked the EU membership process, opening talks would mark the clear step in the EU’s attempts to renew its expansion to the Western Balkans after years of neglect for the region. After a long debate at the meeting in Luxembourg, the European ministers have decided to give a conditional green light to the start of EU accession talks with Macedonia (and Albania). In other words, Macedonia’s EU accession talks will start in June 2019, provided that certain conditions are met.²⁴ Despite the broad EU support to open the accession talks immediately, France and the Netherlands opposed the move, saying they first want to see Macedonia (and Albania) sustain their reforms. The other EU officials said France’s deeper concern was that opening accession talks with Macedonia (and Albania) “would play into the hands of far-right politicians who are gaining support with populist pledges to stop migration - including from relatively

²² H. Smith, “Macedonia agrees to new name after 27-year dispute with Greece”, *The Guardian*, 12 June 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/12/macedonia-agrees-to-new-name-after-27-year-dispute-with-greece>, (accessed 1 September 2018); “Macedonia and Greece: Deal after 27-year row over a name”, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-44401643>, (accessed 1 September 2018).

²³ I. Sekularac and K. Casule, *Macedonia leader vows to press on with name change despite referendum failure*, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-macedonia-referendum/macedonia-leader-vows-to-press-on-with-name-change-despite-referendum-failure-idUSKCN1M90U1?il=0>, (accessed 9 October 2018).

²⁴ S. J. Marusic, *Macedonia, Albania Hail EU Approval for Accession Talks*, 2018, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/eu-paves-the-road-for-macedonia-albania-accession-talks-06-27-2018>, (accessed 2 September 2018).

poor eastern European Member States of the EU to the more prosperous western member countries... They don't want to open this before European elections next year".²⁵ However, Macedonia will have to show progress on making reforms in areas like judicial systems, proactive investigations into and verdicts in high-level corruption cases, intelligence and security services, as well as public administration. These steps will be assessed in a future Commission report and, "depending on progress made", the first Intergovernmental Conference is expected to happen by the end of 2019.²⁶ Romania is to take over the Presidency of the Council of the EU in January 2019, during a period that may prove crucial for Macedonia's accession bid. Hence, the prominence that the Romanian presidency "will attach to the continuation of the EU enlargement policy and the development of political relations with the Western Balkan states", the help with technicalities that the country has already offered and the principal support to the reform process are especially important for Macedonia.²⁷

While Germany shares French concerns about whether accession talks could start with Macedonia (and Albania), the country has decided to support expansion for geopolitical reason and strategic dimension of bringing Western Balkans into the EU fold. While the EU has been distressed by one crisis after another (e.g. Brexit, Greek debt, migrants and refugees), nationalist and inter-ethnic tensions have continued to exist in the Western Balkans. The EU needs to increase its efforts and make its work more visible if the bloc wants to counter any Russian attempts to destabilize the region. In July 2018, NATO formally invited Macedonia to start talks to join the military alliance. Nevertheless, this prospect is at variance with how Moscow envisions the Balkans. "The Kremlin has made it clear that it wants to render Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Macedonia 'a strip of militarily neutral countries'".²⁸ In the late 2016, Montenegro accused Russia of trying to orchestrate a coup to thwart the country's bid to join the alliance, although Montenegro formally became the 29th member of the North Atlantic Alliance in 2017. Yet, this Western Balkan country was thrust into the limelight because of criticisms the U.S. President Trump made of the Alliance calling into question NATO's central principle of mutual defence.²⁹ The comments came only a week after a strained NATO summit meeting in July 2018 when the President urged allies to speed up their progress in meeting the target of spending 2 percent of their GDP on defence. Although many experts agree to the principle that other countries should pay more, the critics oppose the manner in which Trump has

²⁵ R. Emmott, *EU divided over Balkan accession as NATO says Macedonia welcome*, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-balkans/eu-divided-over-balkan-accession-as-nato-says-macedonia-welcome-idUSKBN1JL0OL>, (accessed 2 September 2018).

²⁶ Council of the European Union, "Council Conclusions on enlargement and stabilization and association process", Brussels, 2018, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/35863/st10555-en18.pdf>, (accessed 2 September 2018).

²⁷ *Romanian government "firm political support" for the European and Euro-Atlantic path of the Republic of Macedonia*, 2018, <https://actmedia.eu/daily/romanian-government-firm-political-support-for-the-european-and-euro-atlantic-path-of-the-republic-of-macedonia/76324>, (accessed 2 September 2018).

²⁸ M. Naunov, *Name deal, EU, NATO, and Russian meddling: Will "North Macedonia" get past Russia?*, 2018, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2018/06/22/name-deal-eu-nato-russian-meddling-will-north-macedonia-get-past-russia/>, (accessed 3 September 2018).

²⁹ R. Browne, *Why the US is obligated to defend Montenegro*, 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/07/18/politics/montenegro-nato-article-5/index.html>, (accessed 12 October 2018).

gone about it, issuing rhetoric that destabilizes the organization and undermines the allies, while appearing softer on Russian President Putin.³⁰ According to a former supreme NATO allied commander, Montenegro has been under permanent pressure by Russia for more than a decade and thus, he found the President Trump's comments about Montenegro "worrying". After NATO invited Montenegro to join, Russia solemnly promised 'retaliatory actions'. While Russia's link to the coup plot has been difficult for Montenegro to prove, the political analyses for the region say that Russian influence causes a real threat to the small country's sovereignty. To some Montenegrin officials, NATO is the best alternative for fighting against Russian influence in the region, so symbolically Montenegro gives a lot that is not calculated monetarily.³¹ Now that Montenegro is an official NATO member, Moscow is putting their eyes on Macedonia, the most serious candidate to become the 30th member state of NATO. In economic terms, Russia's powers in the Western Balkans have been on decline for years. Trade and investment with other European nations is far more important than that of Russia. The country's highest economic influence in the region is in the energy sector, although even this influence centres on certain countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia and Serbia, which are dependent upon the Russian gas imports. In general terms, Moscow is trying to create an image of itself as a caring partner and a protector of sovereignty and of Orthodox Christianity – an antithesis of the interfering of the decadent West. The country's style relies on time-tested tactic of Russia to exploit the pre-existing ethnic, historic and religious tensions, regional stereotypes, as well as the unresolved legacy of conflicts. The country's propaganda extends this toxic ethnic and religious messaging and misinforms the public about the Russia's interest and intentions in the region.³² Over recent years in Macedonia, Russia has established more than 30 Russo-Macedonian cultural associations, funded local media outlets, courted Russophile parties etc. Macedonia believes that the name deal and membership of EU and NATO are crucial components of the country's strategy to normalise its relations with its neighbours and to become a more active player in the regional and global arena. "It follows, then, that scuttling the name deal would be an effective way of preventing Skopje from entering the alliance".³³ Opposition groups in Macedonia and Greece have seriously disputed the deal, and to make the things even more complicated, both countries' governments have accused Russia for trying to destabilize the agreement. Hence, if the EU wants to transform the region, it has to be aware of the geopolitical changes that have taken place in the Balkans. In 2003, when the Balkan countries were given a green light to begin the long road to EU membership, there was little doubt that the region's future would be European. Russia was looking at the Balkans mainly as a transit area for the country's energy exports to the western European markets. The country's ambition then was to keep a degree of influence rather

³⁰ A. Smith, *Trump calls out 'very aggressive' Montenegro in latest NATO jibe*, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/trump-calls-out-very-aggressive-montenegro-latest-nato-jibe-n892311>, (accessed 12 October 2018).

³¹ M. Specia, *Montenegro: What to know about the tiny NATO Ally Trump Slighted*, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/19/world/europe/montenegro-donald-trump-nato.html>, (accessed 12 October 2018).

³² D. Kochis, "A Roadmap for Strengthened Transatlantic Pathways in the Western Balkans", *Backgrounders*, no. 3286, 2018, <https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2018-03/BG3286.pdf>, (accessed 3 September 2018).

³³ *Macedonia, Greece: Russia wades into the fray over a Balkan name dispute*, 2018, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/macedonia-greece-russia-wades-fray-over-balkan-name-dispute>, (accessed 3 September 2018).

than to compete with Brussels. Back then, nobody was thinking about China's presence in the Balkans. Nowadays, there is a widespread and growing geopolitical competition in the region. With the launch of 'One Belt, One Road' Initiative in 2013, China has become an unprecedented player in the Balkans. In concrete terms, this initiative is an enormously ambitious development campaign through which China wants to stimulate trade and trigger economic growth across Asia and beyond by building a huge amount of infrastructure across Africa, Asia and Europe. Nevertheless, many believe that this new "silk road" project is becoming a sort of reservoir for political influence in those countries where China is making an investment. The Balkan countries have incorporated a number of Chinese infrastructural projects that run contrary to the EU's model of tenders regulated by detailed EU legislation.³⁴ This makes China a political and normative danger for the EU's stance in the Western Balkans – as long as the bloc is unable or unwilling to integrate these countries, they will be incited to form closer relations with China, which offers its financial assistance in a rather unconditional manner, as compared to the EU's strict conditionality. The socially and economically depressed Western Balkan countries are pretty much aware that they would not be able to join the EU in the foreseeable future. Hence, the China's short-term solutions to development problems offset the long-term political considerations about the EU membership. Moreover, unlike the EU funds, "which are frequently burdened with long waiting procedures and severe compliance restrictions, all of the mentioned Chinese investments are allocated based on swift decision making, without any strict compliance requirements."³⁵ In 2012, China launched the 16+1 initiative seeking to advance cooperation with 16 countries (including Western Balkans except Kosovo) in Central and Eastern Europe. Chinese activity in the Western Balkans is essentially a long-standing investment that seeks to gather economic, diplomatic and political influence. Yet, despite all these initiatives, no one looked at China as a key strategic player in the Balkans, mainly for the geographical distance. Nowadays, however, the geographical logic of Chinese investment overtures is evident if one draws a line that connects Greece, Macedonia, Serbia and Hungary into a single territorial unit. Macedonia is a geographical core of the Balkans, bordering Bulgaria, Albania, Greece and Serbia. The Chinese Exim Bank has provided much of the funding in the country for the construction of two highways by Chinese contractors. Nevertheless, China's approach to the region is different from that of Russia. In other words, China does not strive for destabilizing the Western Balkans, but rather to integrate itself with the countries in the region that represent a channel to European markets and a way for China to project the country's soft power and acquire friends among the candidates for EU membership. So, China, unlike Russia, is not interested in disrupting the Western Balkans' EU integration process. Instead, the country is boosting it, as it believes that it would provide safety for its own investments and views engagement in the region as a way to make links with the EU even closer. In essence, the Chinese influence in the Western Balkans should not be overstated for several reasons. Firstly, while China is

³⁴ *Cautious EU holds China's Europe ambitions in check*, 2018, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Belt-and-Road/Cautious-EU-holds-China-s-Europe-ambitions-in-check>, (accessed 3 September 2018).

³⁵ V. Vuksanovic, *The unexpected regional player in the Balkans: China*, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/11/unexpected-regional-player-balkans-china/>, (accessed 3 September 2018).

looking for cooperation and trade opportunities, the country is not willing to get involved in the local rivalries and disputes. Secondly, even if One Belt, One Road Initiative is fully implemented and would thereby decrease the geographical distance between the Balkans and China, the latter is still too far away to have an influence in the same way as the West does.³⁶ Thirdly, for all of the Western Balkan countries, the EU is a leading trade partner, accounting for over 73% of the region's trade. The geographical proximity, and the cultural and social links, all suggest that the Western Balkans remain attached strictly to the EU. However, to use all of these advantages, the EU must mobilize its financial instruments quickly and make them available to the Western Balkan countries so they can address their development needs.³⁷ Finally, the EU must send a strong political message that the region will join the Union eventually, to evade insecurity and maintain the influence of the bloc at a time when the presence of China and other external powers is rising steadily.

4. Ability to take on the obligations of membership: alignment with the Acquis

As regards the ability to assume the obligations of membership, the latest Commission assessments suggest that the country is moderately prepared in most areas, including those of competition, transport and energy. The country demonstrates a good level of preparation in areas such as customs union, company law, science and research and trans-European networks. Further efforts are needed across the board, and especially in those few areas where the country is at an early stage of preparation, such as freedom of movement for workers.³⁸ In order to expand further on Macedonia's ability to take on the obligations of membership, Table 2 summarizes the latest assessment and is also indicative of whether the country's preparations are moving forward. It covers all chapters of the *acquis*, and whether there has been any progress and how the overall level of preparation stands in each specific chapter. Table 3 and Table 4 show the number of chapters that fall into different categories of progress and level of preparation according to the Commission's assessment methodology. Given that Macedonia was regional forerunner in the alignment with *acquis* just few years ago, the picture that appears here is somewhat concerning. Namely, "good progress" is assessed in areas regarding the political criteria (chapters 23 and 24), "some progress" is noticed in 23 chapters, while none of the previous recommendations have been addressed (no progress has been made) in 8 chapters. It is possible that this can be partly explained by the reduced capacity of the highly politicized administration during the last years. This is, however, not the only reason. It is now obvious that the Government gave much priority to the political criteria and regional cooperation and thus failed to look after the needed work on chapters – alignment with the policies and *acquis* and their implementation

³⁶ Vuksanovic, *The unexpected regional player in the Balkans: China*.

³⁷ V. Medak et al., "Twelve proposals for EU enlargement from the Western Balkans", *Belgrade*, 2018, <http://www.epi.org.mk/docs/Twelve-Proposals-web.pdf>, (accessed 3 September 2018).

³⁸ European Commission, "The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 2018 Report", *Strasbourg*, 2018, <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20180417-the-former-yugoslav-republic-of-macedonia-report.pdf>, (accessed 1 September 2018).

and execution. Besides, the Commission highlights the lowered quality of policy coordination in respect of European integration, including the policy measures and implementation of the EU financial assistance.

Table 2: Summary of Macedonia's ability to assume the obligations of EU membership

CHAPTER	EXTENT OF PROGRESS	OVERALL LEVEL OF PREPARATION
1. Free movement of goods	No Progress	Moderately Prepared
2. Freedom of movement for workers	No Progress	Early Stage
3. Right of establishment and freedom to provide services	No Progress	Moderately Prepared
4. Free movement of capital	Some Progress	Moderately Prepared
5. Public procurement	Some Progress	Moderately Prepared
6. Company law	Some Progress	Good Level of Preparation
7. Intellectual property law	Some Progress	Moderately Prepared
8. Competition policy	No Progress	Moderately Prepared
9. Financial services	Some Progress	Moderately Prepared
10. Information society and media	No Progress	Moderately Prepared
11. Agriculture and rural development	Some Progress	Moderately Prepared
12. Food safety, veterinary and phytosanitary policy	Some Progress	Good Level of Preparation
13. Fisheries	No Progress	Moderately Prepared
14. Transport Policy	Some Progress	Moderately Prepared
15. Energy	Some Progress	Moderately Prepared
16. Taxation	Some Progress	Moderately Prepared
17. Economic and monetary policy	Some Progress	Moderately Prepared
18. Statistics	Some Progress	Moderately Prepared
19. Social policy and employment	Some Progress	Moderately Prepared
20. Enterprise and industrial policy	No Progress	Moderately Prepared

21. Trans-European networks	Some Progress	Good Level of Preparation
22. Regional policy and coordination of structural instruments	Some Progress	Moderately Prepared
23. Judiciary and fundamental rights	Good Progress	Some Level of Preparation
24. Justice, freedom and security	Good Progress	Moderately Prepared
25. Science and research	Some Progress	Good Level of Preparation
26. Education and culture	Some Progress	Moderately Prepared
27. Environment and climate change	Some Progress	Some Level of Preparation
28. Consumer and health protection	No Progress	Moderately Prepared
29. Customs union	Some Progress	Good Level of Preparation
30. External relations	Some Progress	Moderately Prepared
31. Foreign, security and defence policy	Some Progress	Moderately Prepared
32. Financial Control	Some Progress	Moderately Prepared
33. Financial and Budgetary Provisions	Some Progress	Early Stage

Source: European Commission (2018)

Table 3: Progress of Macedonia by number of chapters of the *acquis communautaire*

COMMISSION ASSESSMENT	NUMBER OF CHAPTERS
Good Progress	2
Some Progress	23
No Progress	8
Total	33

Source: European Commission (2018)

Table 4: Macedonia's current ability to take on the obligations of EU membership according to state of play in number of chapters of the *acquis communautaire*

COMMISSION ASSESSMENT	NUMBER OF CHAPTERS
Good Level of Preparation	5

Some Level of Preparation	2
Moderately Prepared	24
Early Stage	2
Total	33

Source: European Commission (2018)

The Government should promptly address this negative trend and embark on measures that will strengthen the alignment capacity with *acquis* and coordination on European integration - including both administrative and policy capacity. Then again, these results may possibly be interpreted as a by-product of the changed EU enlargement strategy that gave priorities to the “fundamentals first” principles and the development agenda rather than the *acquis* alignment. Hence, the Commission should boost the alignment with EU policies and *acquis* in a more meaningful manner and reinforce the reform support in the scope of a wider economic and societal aspect.³⁹

5. Trade integration of Macedonia: the EU remains a leading partner

The integration of Macedonia in the world economy has developed through the three mutually compatible processes: integration into the multilateral trading system (membership in the World Trade Organization), integration into the European Union (Stabilization and Association Agreement with the EU) and regional trade integration (free trade agreements with the countries in the region and Europe).⁴⁰ As a small country, Macedonia is highly open to trade (exports and imports in goods accounted for 105.8% of GDP in 2016). Thus, the country is vastly dependent on international developments and vulnerable to external shocks, such as the recent global economic crisis. “... the real economy was hit severely at the end of 2008 through a collapse in export demand and loss of external financing. Industrial production and exports declined sharply.”⁴¹ Trade flows have been very dynamic in the past, thus confirming the continuous expansion of the Macedonia's trade integration. Both export (from 1.3 to 4.8 billion US\$) and import (from 2.1 to 6.8 billion US\$) of goods have recorded a multiple increase in the period between 2000 and 2016.

The trade deficit of the country, which amounted to 18.1% of GDP in 2016, can partially be explained by import of the large items, which are necessary for the expansion of the economy, namely petroleum and petroleum products, textile yarn, iron and steel, non-ferrous metals, etc. (Figure 1). Such an import structure points to certain structural weaknesses of the Macedonian economy, i.e. dependency on energy imports and the low developing levels of the textile industry that is still dominated by

³⁹ S. Kacarska, et al., *Recommendation with a future? Analysis of the 2018 European Commission Report on the Republic of Macedonia*, 2018, http://www.epi.org.mk/docs/EPI_Analysis_ECReport2018_EN.pdf, (accessed 1 September 2018).

⁴⁰ World Trade Organization, “Trade Policy Review: The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”, *Report by the Secretariat*, 2013, https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/tpr_e/s290_e.pdf, (accessed 10 January 2018).

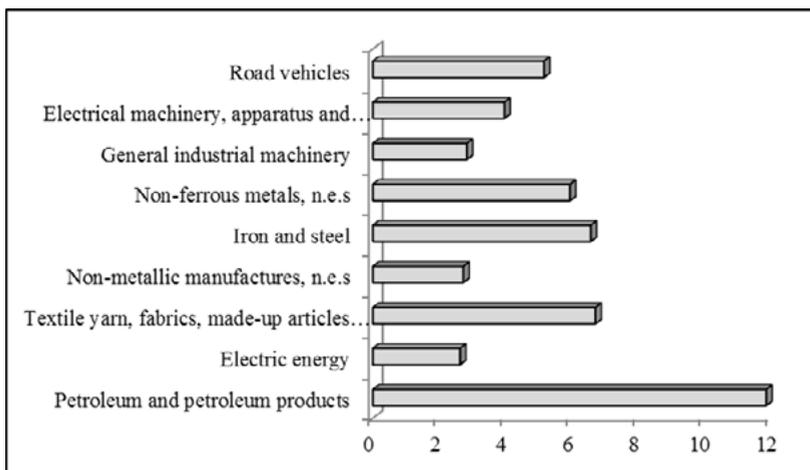
⁴¹ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, “Investment Policy Review: The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”.

imports for further processing.⁴²

Although the exports have diversified in recent years and the structure shifted (mainly on account of foreign investors) towards the higher value-added products (e.g. machinery and transport equipment), the country is moving very slowly away from products requiring unskilled labour, low technology and significant resources (including primary products) (Figure 2).⁴³

The EU remained by far the most important trading partner of Macedonia in both exports and imports (79.9% and 62.0% of total export and import of goods in 2016, respectively) (Figure 3). Trade integration is an essential component of the country's economic development and the EU has the most important role in promoting such integration given that most of the country's trade is with the EU Member States. Macedonia is the first country that signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) on 9 April 2001 and has also become the first country where SAA entered into force on 1 April 2004.

Figure 1: Republic of Macedonia: import structure
(product groups with the highest % share of total imports, according to Standard International Trade Classification, average 2000-2016)

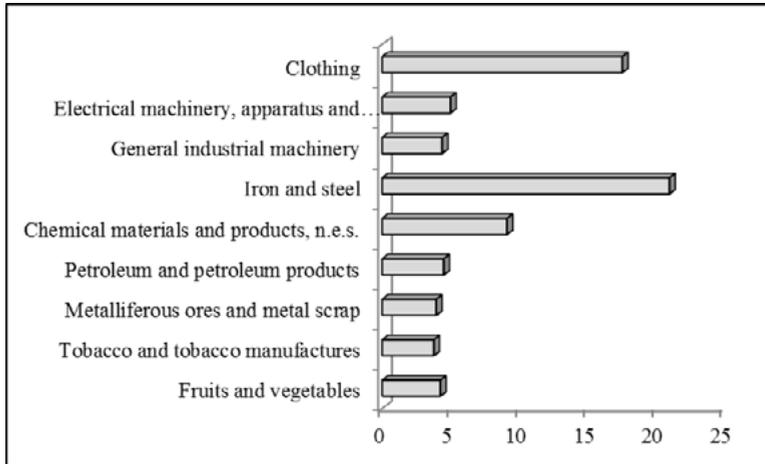


Source: National Bank of the Republic of Macedonia and author's calculations

⁴² O. Kostoska and P. Mitrevski, "Evaluating foreign trade specialization and qualitative competitiveness of a transition economy: the case of Macedonia", *Empirica. Journal of European Economics*, vol. 43, no. 3, 2016, pp. 633-655.

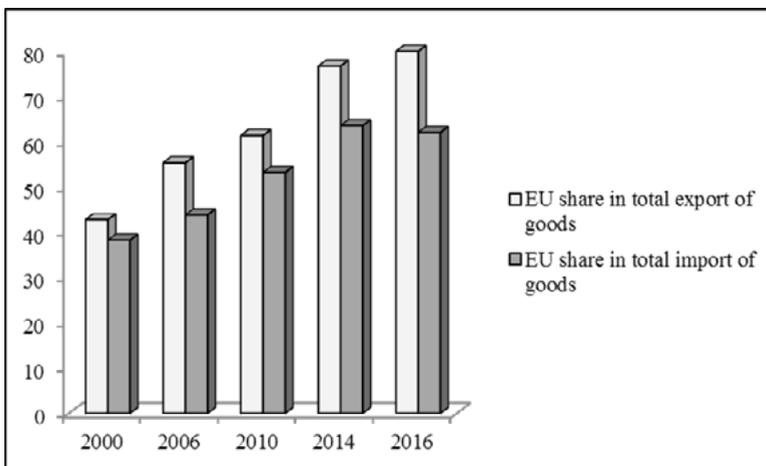
⁴³ Kostoska and Mitrevski, "Evaluating foreign trade specialization and qualitative competitiveness of a transition economy: the case of Macedonia", pp. 633-655.

Figure 2: Republic of Macedonia: export structure
(product groups with the highest % share of total exports, according to Standard International Trade Classification, average 2000-2016)



Source: National Bank of the Republic of Macedonia and author's calculations

Figure 3: Republic of Macedonia: % share of EU in total export and import of goods



Source: National Bank of the Republic of Macedonia and State Statistical Office

The Agreement sets forth the cooperation framework between the EU and Macedonia and permits a progressive harmonization of the relevant policies, legislation and institutions in the country with the values and standards of the EU. Being a part of the SAA, an Interim Agreement concerning trade and trade-related matters entered into force in 2001, which permits the country to benefit from asymmetric trade preferences of the EU. This Agreement provides for full trade liberalization between the EU and Macedonia, except for some beef and fisheries products and wine. On its behalf, the country accepted complete abolition of quantitative restrictions and gradual reduction of customs duties over a period of ten years.

Furthermore, the EU has supported an increase in regional trade through the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), which is the other main trading partner of Macedonia.⁴⁴ The latter has been created as a consequence of the EU recommendation to future members to prepare for membership by establishing free trade areas. In fact, CEFTA has served to be, and (in its current form) remains, a kind of preparatory framework for EU accession.

6. Conclusions

The Western Balkans must fully comply with the Copenhagen criteria in order to be able to join the European Union. While none of the countries yet meets these criteria today, significant progress has been made both on reforms and on overcoming the distressing legacy of conflicts and war; convincing and wide-ranging reforms are still required in critical areas, mainly the rule of law, competitiveness and regional cooperation and reconciliation. But, then again, Macedonia (unlike the others of the Western Balkans) has faced a severe additional problem on the road to EU membership. This very hurdle was not generated by the already difficult process of political and economic transition, nor by the value and standards of the EU, but by the 25-year-old row with Greece over the country's name that has blocked its entry both to EU and NATO. Macedonia was an active partner in the Stability Pact and honest contributor within the Regional approach and steadily met all obligations of the EU Conditionality Strategy. The EU has therefore decided Macedonia to be the first country in the region to make a step forward in the stabilization and association process.

As an act of confirming its strategic orientation, the country has applied for an EU membership in 2004, but has been stuck for more than ten years after the Council decided in December 2005 to grant it the candidate status. Montenegro and Serbia have started accession talks in 2012 and 2014, respectively, and could become EU members as early as 2025, despite not having even been separate countries when Macedonia's EU application was made. The Commission has issued several positive recommendations to begin entry negotiations, but this cycle of recommendations has been followed by the Council's decision to postpone its approval until the necessary resolution of the

⁴⁴ European Commission, "The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Progress Report 2014", Brussels, 2014, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/key_documents/2014/20141008-the-former-yugoslav-republic-of-macedonia-progress-report_en.pdf, (accessed 10 March 2018).

name dispute has occurred ever since. And, finally, in June 2018 Macedonia reached a deal with Greece to change its name to the Republic of North Macedonia. The accord must be ratified by the respective parliaments and also put to a referendum in Macedonia. The referendum was held on 30 September 2018, but failed to reach the turnout threshold. Being non-binding, as well as including constitutional changes, its result will still have to be approved by two-thirds of the Parliament. The European Commissioner for Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations called the 'yes' vote to be significant providing a broad support for the Agreement and for the country's Euro-Atlantic path, and urged political leaders to respect the decision and take it forward with utmost responsibility.

After a long debate, following the withdrawal of the Greek veto as a part of the agreement to change the country's name, the European ministers have decided that Macedonia's EU accession talks will start in June 2019, provided that certain conditions are met. While some Member States expressed concerns about corruption and the rule of law in Macedonia (and Albania), the others have pushed to bring the Western Balkans into the EU fold to strengthen the EU's influence in the region. Germany, in particular, has decided to support the enlargement for geopolitical reasons and to counter Russian attempts to destabilize the region, as well as the rising Chinese interest in the Western Balkans. The geographical proximity, the cultural and social links, as well as the importance of trade relations, would all make Macedonia (and the Western Balkans in general) to remain firmly attached to the EU. However, the EU needs to behave more like a strategic and geopolitical actor, and less like a bureaucratic player, and must act quickly to make its financial instruments available to the Western Balkan countries so they can tackle their development problems.

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