

Unfulfilled Promises and Missed Opportunities in North Macedonia

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Prospects of EU membership are on hold in North Macedonia, despite it going as far as to change its name to resolve a dispute with Greece. Progress made a great political cost was not enough for some EU countries and the accession process now needs to be put together again. Simonida Kacarska, director of the European Policy Institute in Skopje, presents the reasons behind the latest EU non-decision and explains why its repercussions will be felt well beyond North Macedonia.

October 2019, the third time in the last 16 months that the Republic of North Macedonia expected the start of its accession negotiations with the EU. This expectation was built on three pillars : the breakthrough Prespa Agreement with neighbouring Greece, the positive assessment in 2019 of the European Commission as to progress on the rule of law, and the support of important member states such as Germany. The lack of a decision at the October 2019 summit showed that a critical element was nevertheless missing : French support.

In view of the summit, French officials have requested a review of the enlargement process and even seemed to go as far as questioning the overall prospects of the Western Balkans countries joining the EU. This turn of events has already taken its toll on the Macedonian political scene in various ways, including through early elections, exacerbating existing internal divisions in the country, as well as giving wind in the sails to forces that question reform efforts in the region overall. This failure to decide regarding North Macedonia brings major implications for the country, as well as for the Western Balkans and the European Union as a whole.

North Macedonia, tired of waiting

With respect to its European integration, the Macedonian path has been rather idiosyncratic. The country signed the Stabilisation and Association Agreement in 2001 and became a candidate for EU accession in 2005 – much earlier than the other countries in the region. It was the first case in which the European Commission did not automatically recommend the start of the negotiations upon granting the status of a candidate country. This recommendation came four years later, in 2009, yet it was not followed up with a European Council decision due to the dispute with Greece over the name of the country. Macedonia also was the first country in which the European Commission started using the term backsliding and in effect froze the recommendation for accession negotiations between 2015 and 2018.

The comeback of the country on the accession path since 2017 has been considered as somewhat extraordinary. The 2017 government in a year since its appointment reclaimed the recommendation for the start of the accession negotiations and managed to end the 27-year dispute with Greece by renaming the country North Macedonia. This politically costly agreement has been hailed as an example of incredible political will to tackle seemingly intractable disputes in a region that has been known to produce conflicts instead of solutions. Yet, the Prespa Agreement with Greece has taken its toll on an already fragile and divided Macedonian society. The passing of the agreement has been accompanied by an unsuccessful referendum followed by political shenanigans and difficult concessions to gather the 80 votes it needed to ratify through constitutional changes. Although highly painful and

contested, the Prespa Agreement was in effect signed to remove the Greek veto as the unsurmountable obstacle to the start of the EU accession negotiations and to ensure NATO membership. Overall, the signing in 2018 was presented by the government and understood by the public as crucial for opening the path of the country towards the much-awaited EU accession negotiations. At the same time, the EU member states also hailed the agreement as a historic step towards good neighbourly relations and as a key to the European future of the country.

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With this trajectory, North Macedonia has become a rather specific case in the region. On the one hand, due to its position of an early starter, Macedonia is relatively well aligned with the European legislation, comparable or in some areas standing better than Serbia and Montenegro. On the other hand, as a result of the lack of progress in the passing of the formal threshold of a country negotiating accession, it is placed in a group with countries which have started their accession path much later. Yet, it is also the country from the region which has made some of the most difficult concessions for the purposes of EU accession, recognised also by the vast majority of member states, such as the Prespa Agreement.

The EU summits as the story of the boy who cried wolf

Since the signing of the Prespa Agreement in mid-June 2018, there have been three instances when the Commission recommended opening negotiations to the European Council but no decision was taken. The June 2018 Council was the first after the signing of the Prespa Agreement. At this meeting, the Council postponed the decision for a year until June 2019. Then, the 2019 June summit simply delayed the decision to October as the enlargement package of the European Commission was published too late for the member states to consider the assessments. In view of these delays, the expectations for the October 2019 summit had been exceptionally high, and the failure to reach a decision due to the clear rift between EU members was a serious disappointment. This inability was also reflected in the brevity of the conclusions obliging the Council to revert to the topic before the 2020 Zagreb Summit.

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Yet, while the increasing hesitation among the EU members as to the future of enlargement policy became clear over the last Commission mandate, the October 2019 discussions pushed the debate further by delineating three different positions as to accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania. First, France and to a certain extent the Netherlands, with pronounced scepticism (in the Dutch case, particularly regarding Albania), second, Germany where support for the accession negotiations is tied to strict conditionality, and the last, third group consisting primarily of the post-2004 entrants which clearly support the further enlargement of the Union.

France was staunchly opposed to opening accession negotiations with the two countries. While President Emmanuel Macron expressed doubts on several occasions, including the 2018 Sofia summit. In October 2019 these

doubts became a clear ‘no’ to the start of the accession negotiations with the two candidates. The rationale behind this position followed two parallel tracks: on the one hand, just a few days before the summit, French officials requested a revision of the methodology of the accession negotiations before making a decision on North Macedonia and Albania. Although no clear proposal has been made, the expectation is that this revision will include stricter monitoring and implementation of reforms, especially in relation to rule of law, as well as providing for reversibility in the accession process. On the other hand, statements of French officials after the summit have questioned the necessity of considering the Western Balkans countries as future members of the Union, bringing to the fore deep concerns as to the validity of the membership perspective opened up to the Western Balkans in the 2003 Thessaloniki Agenda. President Macron gives primacy to deepening the EU, not widening it, and is more concerned with reforming its internal workings.

What it means for North Macedonia, the Western Balkans and the EU

The delay in the EU accession process at the October summit raises legitimate concerns in both North Macedonia and across the Western Balkans region. First, at the national level, the immediate response of the political elite has been to schedule early parliamentary elections in spring 2019. This return to political unpredictability comes in the aftermath of one of the most difficult transfers of power in the region that occurred in 2017. Second, this uncertainty also puts into question the implementation of the Prespa Agreement, since part of its key provisions is linked to opening the accession process, a concern recently raised from the Greek side. Third, stripping away the membership perspective and undermining trust in the EU creates a significant political vacuum in a country in which the Union has successfully acted as a mechanism of conflict resolution. At several instances, the promise of EU membership has been used to bridge difficult political situations, including a short-lived inter-ethnic armed conflict in 2001. Fourth, the questioning of the membership paradigm has important implications for North Macedonia’s overall logic of governance and policymaking. Due to the rather idiosyncratic nature of the Macedonian case, alignment with EU legislation has been one of the core principles of the operation of national institutions and international organisations for two decades.

The promise of EU membership has been used to bridge difficult political situations, including a short-lived inter-ethnic armed conflict in 2001.

As for the regional level, in the last two years, the Macedonian case has been used in many instances by European political leaders to promote a politics of reconciliation and cooperation in the Western Balkans. The objective of this behaviour was largely directed towards a peaceful resolution of some of the remaining difficult disputes such as the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue. Needless to say, the delayed decision on North Macedonia has removed any potential for using the Prespa Agreement as an example. In the last year, regional leaders have often used this specific case as an example of the EU’s unfulfilled promises and as a justification for forging closer ties with powers such as Russia and China. For the countries currently negotiating EU accession, it will now be almost impossible to win support for making difficult concessions with a view to potential EU membership.

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The lack of clarity as to the future of enlargement policy overall has significant implications for the EU itself and its role as a global actor. In relation to the former, it will be challenging for the new EU institutions, foremost the European Commission, to develop a robust policy approach in view of enlargement to the Western Balkans. While the Juncker Commission tried to set a direction for a 'credible perspective', its contestation denotes a strategic shift and a blow to the key pillar of EU policy towards the region. As for the EU's global role, the indecisiveness on the future direction of enlargement undermines the EU's normative role as a foreign policy actor geared towards the democratisation of its neighbourhood. This uncertainty is further amplified by the stark divisions between EU countries themselves.

Is there a silver lining?

Writing this article in the aftermath of the summit contributes to its tone of doom and gloom. If supportive of the European integration of the Western Balkans, one is forced to seek for the usually tangential consequences that might lead to a shift. The summit and the attention paid to the issue of enlargement break with the practice of treating this region as the elephant in the room, or the cousin that no one wants to talk about. The fierce nature of the discussion has brought the attention of policymakers and mainstream media for whom enlargement was never high up enough on the agenda.

Unfortunately, not many argue for reclaiming the role of the accession process as a tool for democratic transformation.

As a result, a multitude of proposals as to how to fix the enlargement process has popped up, not only from the side of the Western Balkans but also from EU stakeholders. Most of them for the moment flirt with forms of EU membership minus or differentiated integration. Unfortunately, not many argue for reclaiming the role of the accession process as a tool for democratic transformation. North Macedonia could be the case for such a scenario. However, in the absence of agency and action on the side of the EU, it could be a big missed opportunity.



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