

POLICY BRIEF

LISBON-SKOPJE-THESSALONIKI: HOMECOMING EUROPE FIVE REASONS WHY MACEDONIA SHOULD START NEGOTIATIONS

Enlargement is, by large, the most powerful policy tool of the EU. It serves EU's strategic interests in securing stability, security, and conflict prevention. In addition, enlargement has helped to increase prosperity and growth opportunities and has secured vital transport and energy routes. The present enlargement agenda covers Western Balkans and Turkey, which have been promised EU membership once they fulfil the necessary conditions.

The Accession Partnership adopted by the Council on 18th February 2008 identifies eight key priorities for progress in the accession process by Macedonia, those being proper implementation of all commitments undertaken under the SAA, dialogue between political parties, implementation of the law on police and anticorruption legislation, reform of the judiciary and public administration, as well as measures in employment policy and for enhancing the business environment¹.

In its assessment, the Commission follows the procedures and criteria laid down for all membership applications. These procedures reflect the principle stated by the Member-States at the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003:

*"the pace of further movement of the Western Balkan countries towards the EU lies in their own hands and will depend on each country's performance in implementing reforms"*²

This policy brief focuses on the five reasons why Macedonia should be given the green light for starting accession negotiations, those being: 1) EC recommended accession negotiations on the basis of the fulfilled benchmarks previously determined, 2) bilateral issues are not part of the accession negotiations package, 3) the momentum of 2009 needs to keep going, 4) the Macedonian case provides an opportunity for the EU to prove that it can be a global player, and 5) Macedonia can help revive the Thessaloniki Agenda.

1. Promises Kept

Macedonia was awarded the status of candidate-country in December 2005. The European Commission stated that *"the country is well on its way to satisfy the political criteria set by the Copenhagen European Council in 1993 and the Stabilisation and Association Process"*³.

After four years of acquiring candidate status, Macedonia received a positive assessment by the European Commission.

*"The country fulfils the commitments under the Stabilisation and Association Agreement, has consolidated the functioning of its democracy and ensured the stability of institutions guaranteeing the rule of law and respect of fundamental rights and the country has substantially addressed the key priorities of the accession partnership"*⁴.

¹ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council, Western Balkans: Enhancing the European perspective, Brussels, 5.3.2008, COM (2008) 127 final.

² Thessaloniki agenda for the Western Balkans, General Affairs & External Relations Council (GAERC), Extracts from successive General Affairs & External Relations Councils, 16 June 2003: Western Balkans - Council Conclusions

³ Opinion of the European Commission, December 2005.

⁴ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council, COM (2009) 533, *Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2009-2010*, pages 12-13.

Therefore in October, the Commission recommended Macedonia's transition to the second stage of the Association⁵:

*"In the light of the above considerations and taking into account the European Council conclusions of December 2005 and December 2006, the Commission recommends that negotiations for accession to the European Union should be opened with the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia"*⁶.

The strength of this process has always been its transparency and consistency. The assessment of applicants was known to be rigorous and fair and, by rule, Commission recommendations were always taken into account by the Council of the EU. This meritocratic approach to the accession process has won the EU considerable credit in the region.

Subsequently, the Council of the EU must take a decision in December whether or not accession negotiations will be initiated with Macedonia as recommended by the European Commission. Postponing the decision for any future Council meeting will only demonstrate lack of leadership on the part of the EU and question the credibility of the EU when it comes to keeping its promises.

2. Bilateral Issues

Political considerations that have nothing to do with the actual progress of implemented reforms are not part of the accession process. This has been stated on numerous occasions by EU officials, members of the European Parliament, political leaders, and even political analysts. In its last Enlargement Strategy 2009-2010, the Commission clearly stated:

"Bilateral issues should not hold up the accession process. Bilateral disputes need to be resolved by the parties concerned, who have the responsibility to find solutions in a spirit of good neighbourliness and bearing in mind the overall EU interests".

Citizens across the region are watching Macedonia's progress through the accession process to determine whether the door to EU membership remains open. The decision to be taken by the Council of the EU will influence not just the future of Macedonia, but the future of the

entire region and EU's policy towards it. "No" to Macedonia, means that the usual diplomatic reassurances concerning the European future of the region based on equal and fair procedures will be nothing more than lip service.

That said, a date for starting accession negotiations for Macedonia, will mean that the EU, once again, reaffirms its values, keeping up the momentum of the process, and adheres to the commitments, principles and conditions agreed and reiterated by the Commission's conclusions:

*"The accession process gives strong encouragement to political and economic reform in the enlargement countries and reinforces peace and stability in Europe"*⁷.

3. Return to the Balkans: 2009 Success

2009 has been remarkably successful for the integration process of the Western Balkans. The countries of the regions have moved closer to EU membership as the region made progress in meeting the established criteria and conditions.

Substantial progress was made towards visa liberalisation, leading to the Commission's proposal from July 2009 for visa liberalization for three countries (Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia).

The network of Stabilisation and Association Agreements has been extended further and two membership applications from the region were submitted by Montenegro (December 2008), and Albania (April 2009). Iceland also submitted its application in July 2009.

The European Union's current enlargement process takes place against the background of a deep and widespread recession. The crisis has affected both the EU, but even more the reform process of the enlargement countries. A new Joint Grant Facility⁸ has been created to pool and coordinate different sources of finance and leverage loans with grants for projects representing a priority for the Western Balkans, with the initial focus on infrastructure sectors, including social infrastructure, support to SMEs, energy efficiency and other investment sectors. New instruments however will produce the desired results only if the reform processes in the region proceed in a timely fashion. Successful

⁵ On the basis of Article 5 of the Stabilizations and Association Agreement

⁶ Ibid, page 18.

⁷ EC COM (2009) 533, page 18.

⁸ Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF), 21 October 2009, Brussels.

reforms usually need to be coupled with a political agenda, in this case EU accession.

The Lisbon Treaty is finally a reality. Commissioner Rehn⁹ rightfully claims that the most visible novelty thereof will be the instruments for conducting external relations, enlargement being part of the foreign policy. The so-called enlargement fatigue cannot be used as an excuse any longer and the integration of the Western Balkans must happen as soon as possible. EU's enlargement policy needs a desperate push, and the Croatian success story is clearly not enough. On the other side of the "enlargement fatigue" story is the "accession fatigue". Some political scientists argue that the Western Balkan countries are as tired as the Commission is with all the promises made, but never delivered by the Member-States. The Macedonian case can set the scene for this "push" to happen sooner rather than later, and in December, the Council of the EU can send out a new message to the region.

4. EU as a Global Player

At the core of the Lisbon Strategy lies the objective of the EU to become the most important global player. European values and standards need to be seen as the cornerstone of future global development, especially in the field of climate change, human rights and democracy and last, but not least, security and stability.

From the prospective of EU the global player, Commissioner Rehn puts forward the following considerations in his address at the European Policy Centre in Brussels on 22nd October 2009.

"Let me first ask you a question of conscience: Would you elect somebody who has a messy backyard at home to your City Council? Following the same logic, the EU's credibility as a global actor stands or falls by our ability to shape our very own neighbourhood".

For the sake of argument, let's throw light on the state of affairs in the Western Balkans: Macedonia has the name dispute with Greece as well as the recognition of the church issue with Serbia, Serbia has the Kosovo issue, along with the cooperation with the ICTY, Montenegro and Croatia have the border issue in Prevlaka, Albania

has the problem with the use of continental zone with Greece, and Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo have the statehood problem, and even the Croatian-Slovene bilateral problem is not entirely resolved. All of these problems lie at the heart of Europe and they will not disappear unless sincere efforts are made to work them out. The EU cannot postpone them any longer, nor resolve them without the carrot-instrument, in this case, accelerated process of enlargement.

A few weeks ago, Macedonia signed and ratified the border demarcation agreement with Kosovo, thus solving a decade-long bilateral problem. That makes Macedonia the first and only country in the region without an open border issues, and by that, an example for resolving sensitive issues. Even more importantly, Macedonia can be the source of spreading security in the region, given the chance. The sad reality is that if Macedonia is vetoed in December, it will start producing instability instead of stability.

5. Thessaloniki Revival

The significance of the Thessaloniki Agenda for the Western Balkan countries is indisputable. The process however, was weighed down by the unsuccessful ratification of the Constitutional Treaty in 2005, followed by the Irish "no" to the Lisbon Treaty in 2008. The enlargement fatigue slowly, but surely, took over the process.

Another Greek veto will be a disastrous policy error that will hamper the integration process of the whole region, not just Macedonia.

The consequences of the Greek veto from the NATO Summit in Bucharest, April 2008 are well known to the Macedonian citizens. Nationalism and destruction ruled the country for a long period, to the extent that Macedonian citizens refused to go to their usual (and favourite) summer destination – Greece. Hate speech – on both sides – become everyday routine.

The political leadership in the country was so taken aback that it made the most irrational decisions such as initiating early parliamentary elections in 2008 with the excuse that national unity was called for, forgetting the benchmarks of the Accession Partnership. The peak of national confusion was reached in the course of the elections, and Macedonia organised the worst elections since its independence.

⁹ Olli Rehn, Enlargement Commissioner, Lessons from EU enlargement for its future foreign policy, European Policy Centre, Brussels, 22 October 2009

Another Greek veto would be a replay of the nationalist trauma from 2008. This veto however, will go even further and poison the interethnic relations in the country and, most probably, threaten the implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement. The Albanian political parties have been very constructive, understanding and patient with the Macedonian political bloc. The Albanian political parties however are voicing their support for EU integration of the country, and warned that they will not wait forever for the Macedonians to resolve the name issue with Greece. Just recently, an important representative of the government's coalition party DUI (Democratic Union for Integration) threatened: *"The Albanians will be part of the EU, with or without the Macedonians"*¹⁰.

Another Greek veto will be much worse than in 2008 according to the findings of the last survey of Brima Gallup¹¹. 89% of the respondents answered that they were aware of the fact that Macedonia received a recommendation for starting negotiations with the EU, and 64% of respondents have high expectations that the recommendation will have a positive influence on their quality of life. 71% of the respondents think that Macedonia will become an EU Member-State within five years. The perception of the citizens regarding the main obstacles for EU accession is that 77% of the citizens believe Greece is the main obstacle, followed by unemployment and economic difficulties.

Finally, another Greek veto will not resolve the name issue, and it will certainly not bring the two countries together. Vetoing Gruevski's policy, means vetoing all the citizens of Macedonia and alienating the nations even further.

On the other hand, by opening accession negotiations with Macedonia, the EU will embark upon a very carefully managed process where the country will be continuously monitored and followed in its political and economic reforms, including the capacity to assume membership obligations in accordance with the Copenhagen criteria.

The question that deserves an answer before any veto-decision is made is "Why would Greece veto accession negotiations when the EU, and the other Member-States, including Greece, will de facto

have 66 other opportunities to discontinue negotiations with the formal opening and closing of each chapter of the EC acquis.

By supporting the country in this endeavour Greece can revive the Thessaloniki Agenda and boost EU enlargement policy forward in light of the new Lisbon Treaty. This is a unique opportunity for Greece to demonstrate leadership in integrating the region that it has vested interest in. Opening accession negotiations implies closely monitoring and following the process of democratization on the ground and immediately tackling the problems that might be encountered. Furthermore, the process will provide local civil society with a very powerful tool for monitoring the reforms and a venue for early warnings.

If the Europeanization of the Balkans started in 2003 during the Greek Presidency, 2014 can mark the integration of the Western Balkans into the EU, again during the Greek Presidency. For that to happen, Macedonia must be granted a date for accession negotiations and that can be the starting point of the Thessaloniki Revival. It really is up to Greece whether it will support the Europeanization of the Balkans or it will decide to "Balkanise" the EU.

Conclusions

This paper argues that EU Member-States should be reminded about their commitments made to the countries of the Western Balkans, and their vital interest in lasting stability in the region. Bilateral issues are not part of the accession negotiations package. Macedonia proved that it can resolve difficult issues by settling its border demarcation with Kosovo. The Macedonian case can serve as an example for future leadership in the EU, especially in light of the Lisbon Treaty. Given the chance Macedonia can prove to be a credible "exporter" of security, stability and democracy. Otherwise security can easily change into insecurity and stability can become instability overnight. The citizens of Macedonia do not deserve to be held hostages to nationalistic ideologies and politics. Greece can prove that it can revive the Thessaloniki Agenda by taking a decision on the next Council meeting, along with the other Member-States, to open accession negotiations with Macedonia, thus sending a strong signal to the Western Balkan countries that the region hasn't been forgotten. To quote Ortega y Gasset: *"If Spain (i.e. Macedonia) is the problem, EU is the solution!"*

¹⁰ Rafiz Aliti, 2nd November 2009, A1 Television.

¹¹ Published on MRTV National Television, 26 October 2009.