

Is Patience but a Virtue or a Vice?  
Serbia and Macedonia's Roads to EU Accession  
Negotiations

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## Is Patience but a Virtue or a Vice? Serbia and Macedonia's Roads to EU Accession Negotiations

By Ana Kotevska

The roughly three stages of the EU accession process are common knowledge to inhabitants of all EU-aspiring countries. Especially in the region the EU calls the 'Western Balkans' – a term covering the non-EU Yugoslav successor states and Albania – politicians and common people alike know that when a country is ready, it becomes an official candidate for EU membership. The candidate, then, moves to formal membership negotiations, a process that involves the adoption of reforms to meet the EU accession requirements. Finally, when negotiations and reforms have been successfully performed, a country may join the EU. Serbia and Macedonia are two of the Yugoslav successor states that the European Council has granted a candidate status: Macedonia earned this status in 2005, whereas Serbia attained it in 2012. Furthermore, the European Commission has recommended that both countries begin their respective accession negotiations: a decision dating from 2009 for Macedonia, and recent times for Serbia. All eyes are now on the European Council, an EU institution that consists of the Heads of States of all EU Member States, that decides on the commencement of a country's EU accession negotiations. Its next meeting is to take place the coming June 27<sup>th</sup> – 28<sup>th</sup>. Thus, as they are about to witness their once Yugoslav confederate state Croatia enter the EU on July 1<sup>st</sup>, Serbians and Macedonians alike are looking forward to the upcoming European Council meeting, hoping it will result with a start date for their respective country's negotiations.

Ever since the onset of Serbia's accession process, the EU's key priorities for the country's reforms have been cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) located in The Hague, and normalization of its relations with its former province of Kosovo. In 2008 and 2011 respectively, Serbia has handed over the two most sought after Bosnian Serb genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity indictees, Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic. These two handovers represented an important milestone in Serbia's EU integration process, earning its candidate status. This April 19<sup>th</sup>, a historic agreement between Serbia and Kosovo was signed in Brussels, following long negotiations between the two parties. Subsequently, the European Commission had recommended that the Serbia start its EU membership negotiation talks: thus, all await the European Council to announce a date for the onset of the Serbian EU membership negotiations. Yet some

analysts predict that the European Council will only grant the Commission a “green light” to start the necessary preparations for a start of Serbia’s EU negotiations, rather than decide on a precise date for their onset. The “green light” scenario has caused much agitation and strong statements from the Serbian leadership. “This green light - we're not traffic cops. We're interested in a positive decision of the EU Council, and if we do not get that, I think we will be cheated” - reported the aggravated Serbian Prime Minister Ivica Dacic from the Palace of Serbia - “We had an agreement – the Brussels agreement, an implementation of what we had agreed upon, and in return, a positive decision on the onset of the EU negotiations.” Yet, as reported by the Serbian Magazine *Politika*, the Chief of the EU Delegation in Serbia, Vincent Degert, pointed out that there are many steps ahead on Serbia’s road to EU membership negotiations, implementing the Serbia-Kosovo agreement being one of them. Recently, the German news agency DPA reported that Chancellor Merkel would maintain at the June European Council that negotiations with Serbia could start at the earliest in 2014. This would come as a disappointment to the Serbian leaders who still predict and hope for a start of the negotiations in October 2013.

In October 2009 the European Commission made recommendations to the European Council to open membership negotiations with Macedonia. These recommendations have been reiterated in the following years, but the Council has not yet decided on the Commission’s proposal. At its last meeting (December 11<sup>th</sup> 2012), the Council concluded it would decide on the possibility of opening membership negotiations with the country on the basis of a Commission report to be presented in Spring 2013 elaborating on implementation of EU-related reforms and “steps taken to promote good neighborly relations and to reach a negotiated and mutually accepted solution to the name issue under the auspices of the UN” (Council Conclusions on Enlargement and Stabilization and Association Process). Why does Macedonia’s EU accession process seem to have stalled? In recent years, it appears that the country has achieved progress in several areas. For one, the implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, a 2001 peace agreement ending the armed conflict between the Macedonian security forces and the ethnic Albanian insurgents that set the groundwork for improving the rights of ethnic Albanians, has reached a higher level. Furthermore, the country has enacted numerous economic and legislative reforms, in accordance with the EU requirements. Yet Macedonia’s dispute with Greece over the use of the name Macedonia, widely known as the ‘name issue’, lies still far from resolved. A new effort to bring an end to the dispute as old as Macedonia’s independence has been recently made through a series of meetings between the two parties and the UN Secretary General’s Personal Envoy Mr. Matthew Nimetz, which resulted with Mr. Nimetz’s new solution proposal.

Foreign diplomats stay hopeful that the ‘name issue’ can be overcome and an agreed upon compromise can be reached. On his official visit of the Republic of Macedonia, the US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State in the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, and former US Ambassador in Macedonia, Mr. Philip Reeker, emphasized the importance of sparking a public discussion of the possible dispute solution. Mr. Reeker pointed out to the recently reached agreement between Kosovo and Serbia as an example that deeply rooted problems can be effectively overcome. Indeed, the Macedonian Minister of Foreign Affairs reported that EU membership is one of Macedonia’s strategic goals, and the country remains unwavering in its efforts. Yet while the Minister expressed hopes that Greece will be collaborative in the negotiations, he also noted that Greece “holds all the cards” as an EU member-state, alluding to both its power to take steps to reach a mutually acceptable solution, as well as, Greece’s power to veto any European Council decision. Still, the Greek President, Karolos Papoulias, reported for the Serbian daily *Politika* that as long as the Macedonian government insists on a policy of “Macedonianism” there would be no future for the tiny Balkan country in the EU. The European Commission Report from April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2013 concluded that Macedonia has made progress in the areas suggested by the European Council, pointing out that “Relations with neighbors remained good and steps have been taken in relation to bilateral relations with Bulgaria and Greece. Formal talks on the ‘name issue’ took on new momentum during the reporting period.” (Conclusion on the Report from the Commission to the European Parliament and Council). Even so, it is unclear whether this positive report will prompt the European Council to decide on a start date for the membership negotiations. Moreover, some fear the possibility of a Greek veto on the decision, and would rather see the ‘name issue’ resolved before the country starts its membership negotiations. In light of this, in a speech during the celebration of the 26<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of VMRO-DPMNE (the Macedonian majority party), its president and current Macedonian Prime Minister, Nikola Gruevski, remarked that meritocracy appears to be unimportant to some European Council Members that seem to value politics over principles. He noted that while the country is firmly set on its EU membership goals, it might have to adjust to the short-term or long-term status quo, but still plan on overcoming it: the country’s primary aspiration remains its full EU integration.

While all lies in the hands of the European Council now, a look at the political climate in the European Union points out to slim chances for its further enlargement. A glance at the Council meeting agenda shows that the main focus of the meeting will be economic and monetary policy; only a final note under “other” includes the possibility of the Council deciding over the onset of membership

negotiations of candidate countries. Ever since the economic crisis, enlargement has become a much lesser priority for the Union. The European public at large, facing a recession and fearing immigration waves, is currently rather skeptical of the benefits of enlargement. Yet as reported by *Public Service Europe* a committee in the British House of Lords recently issued a report citing numerous enlargement benefits for the member states such as an increase of the common market, as well as an improvement of Europe's security, especially in the 'Western Balkans'. The European Commissioner for enlargement Stefan Füle even extolled enlargement as a possible solution to the crisis, pointing out that it would increase trade and business opportunities (*Public Service Europe*). Yet the European public remains unconvinced. Many fear that adding more countries to the Union will burden its already difficult decision-making process where a single country could block a European Council decision (e.g. Greece, in the example above). Others dread that the economies of the EU pretenders are simply too weak to withstand the competition from the other EU Member States, and would become their dependents. A report published by the European Union Democracy Observatory, examining the public opinion on enlargement, confirms that "Europeans have become, over the past five years [2007-2011], less favorable towards further enlargement". While until the end of 2008, only around 36% of people said they were against further EU enlargement, in 2011 this percentage rose to 50%. It appears that the crisis has taken its toll on the European public opinion on enlargement too.

Yet while Europe might have grown wary of enlargement, the Balkan nations remain determined to join the Union. As they embark on their long, thorny road to EU accession, they struggle to maintain fragile democracy in multiethnic societies, and fully transition into market economies. In the years since Yugoslavia's breakup, the EU's transformative power has been truly remarkable in the region, pushing the 'Western Balkans' into successful political, economic, legislative reform, and institutional modernization. But will Serbia and Macedonia be given dates for the onset of their respective EU membership negotiations this June? The odds seem not to be in the Balkan nations' favor. Serbia might have to accept that its EU accession process is more than a barter where handing over war criminals earns candidacy, and signing a first agreement with Kosovo will attain a start date for its membership negotiations. Indeed, with Serbian domestic media speculations of a nearing economic bankruptcy, and the constant Dinar depreciation trend and exchange rate volatility, the EU would be reluctant to open negotiations with Serbia for fear of another future European government-debt crisis. Serbia, thus, needs to learn patience, and continue with primarily economic growth, as well as, political and legislative reform to meet the EU requirements. Its southern neighbor, Macedonia, might have to learn that sometimes, old parts need to be severed rather than firmly held onto, only to allow for new to

grow and flourish. Its government needs to make shrewd, yet tough and perhaps unpopular decisions. The delicate yet dreadfully inconvenient ‘name issue’ needs to be soon resolved to launch this country into a new stage of its EU accession process. Thus, as they proceed with their respective EU accession processes, perhaps the two Balkan nations could learn a lesson from each other: Serbia, about Macedonia’s stoic patience, and Macedonia, about Serbia’s readiness to relinquish the past.

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