

Activity Brief  
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**FRIDE**  
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# The road from Skopje to Brussels: Macedonian Euro-Atlantic integration challenges

## About FRIDE

FRIDE is an independent think-tank based in Madrid, focused on issues related to democracy and human rights; peace and security; and humanitarian action and development. FRIDE attempts to influence policy-making and inform public opinion, through its research in these areas.

On 5 June 2009, FRIDE hosted a roundtable 'The road from Skopje to Brussels. Macedonian Euro-Atlantic integration challenges'. The keynote speaker was Ivica Bocevski, deputy prime minister of Macedonia responsible for European affairs and foreign assistance. The panellists in the discussion were Ramón Abaroa, deputy director general for Central and Southern Europe at Spain's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation; Jordi Vaquer, director of CIDOB in Barcelona; José Luis Herrero, head of the OSCE Spillover Monitor Mission to Skopje; and Carlos Flores Juberías, professor at the University of Valencia and honorary consul of Macedonia. The event was attended by Spanish government officials, ambassadors from the South-Eastern European countries to Spain and academics and experts on the region.

The discussion revolved around the challenges that Macedonia<sup>1</sup> faces in furthering its Euro-Atlantic integration agenda, focusing on three central topics:

<sup>1</sup> The country was accepted to the UN under the provisional state name the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, which is also used by the EU and some other international organisations, as well as part of the international community. A number of countries, including some EU members, recognised it under its constitutional name, the Republic of Macedonia.

1. *Macedonia's progress towards EU integration*
2. *Macedonia's bid for NATO membership*
3. *The regional context in South East Europe*

## A prolonged stay in the waiting room for EU accession

Macedonia has been an EU candidate since 2005, but the accession negotiations have not started yet. Implementation by Macedonia of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (2001) is a main precondition to the start of accession talks. In addition to the democratic and economic reform progress, the EU has set further criteria for Macedonia concerning good neighbourly relations, including a resolution of the name issue, successful implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement of 2001, cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia and the return of refugees. Such an extended list of conditions is seen to deviate from the original conditionality based on the Copenhagen criteria and overshadows the pre-accession reform process in Macedonia. From the latter's perspective, the accession process seems more about responding to the concerns raised in EU members' capitals than about fulfilling the membership criteria.

In addition to this more complex accession process, the EU's troubled internal situation - notably the stalled constitutional process - and doubts about further enlargement are delaying the start of the accession negotiations. Enlargement fatigue seems a huge political issue in Europe, as witnessed in the results of the 2009 European elections, which have furthered positions of the populist and extremist parties exploiting anti-immigration and anti-Europe sentiments. The new accession criterion, based on the EU's absorption capacity, is making the journey to Brussels for Skopje an uncertain venture.

Although the name dispute has not been a factor in Macedonia's EU membership application yet, it has delayed the country's membership in NATO, which will only be possible after an agreement is reached. A solution that does away with the FYROM acronym and satisfies both Athens and Skopje has been increasingly difficult to find. Although the EU is not directly involved in the negotiations between Greece and Macedonia that are led by the UN, the dispute puts Macedonia's eventual accession to the EU in peril. The name issue is regarded in Macedonia as an instrument of exclusion from the European integration structures. At the same time, Macedonia should avoid symbolic steps provoking unnecessary tensions in its relations with Greece, such as renaming the Skopje airport and the road after Alexander the Great.

## Democratic consolidation and inter-ethnic relations top the internal agenda

The Commission's progress reports on Macedonia serve to exert pressure on the government to make reforms. Macedonia's progress is measured by the Commission according to eight benchmarks developed within key priorities established by the EU's Accession Partnership (2008) and further elaborated in the Action Plan of the Macedonian government to implement recommendations of the Commission's Progress report (2008). These documents have called upon Macedonia to achieve the following: constructive and inclusive democratic dialogue, in particular in areas which require consensus between all political parties (1); effective implementation of the law on police (2), of judicial reforms (3) and of the anticorruption legislation (4); ensure politically unbiased public administration (5); stimulate

employment creation (6); enhance the general business climate (7); and ensure democratic presidential and local elections in 2009, free of violence (8).

The 2009 presidential elections were positively assessed by the EU and the OSCE, in contrast with the 2008 parliamentary campaign where international standards were not met. However, further improvements are needed, especially in eliminating the use of administrative resources in the electoral campaign. Along with the consolidation of democratic institutions, inter-ethnic relations and the future of state-building remain the main challenges in the internal political development of Macedonia. There is still an urgent need to create a sense of coexistence between different communities in Macedonia that is not just accepted but actually welcomed. The supporters of the integrationist approach argue for state- and nation-building based on citizenship, following the logic of the Ohrid agreement. The federalist approach is in favour of reflecting Macedonia's ethnic composition in state-building. The latter approach is regarded as a source of conflicts as it divides society along ethnic lines. The prospect of EU integration is a particularly potent tool for citizenship based state- and nation-building in Macedonia as EU accession finds support among all the ethnic groups within society.

## Macedonia calls on the EU to open its borders

Currently, three main priorities govern the Macedonian government's relations with the EU: starting accession talks, lifting visas, and the autonomous management of pre-accession assistance. Although Macedonia is a candidate country, the visa regime with the EU has not been lifted yet. Since 2008 the country has enjoyed easier EU visa access for certain social categories of citizens and has held a dialogue with the EU on

abolishing the visa duty. According to the recent assessment of the European Commission, Macedonia is the only Western Balkans country that meets all the requirements for lifting the visa regime with the EU.

Visa free travel is one of the most pressing issues on Macedonia's EU integration agenda, along with the opening of accession negotiations. The visa duty bears down heavily on Macedonian citizens, particularly given the geographic proximity of the EU borders which are within a two-hour drive from Skopje, and the memories of the older generation who enjoyed free travel both to Eastern and Western Europe under the communist rule of the former Yugoslavia. Besides, the visa duty is a financial burden for relatively poor Macedonians. According to the government of Macedonia, Macedonian citizens spend approximately 10 million euros annually on visas to EU countries. What is more, around 70 percent of young Macedonians aged from 16 to 30 have never visited an EU member state, with the exception of Greece. The free travel regime with the EU is regarded as an important integration tool between Macedonian and European societies.

Meanwhile, trade integration has advanced well since 2001 when the Interim Agreement on trade issues was signed; Macedonia currently enjoys virtually free access to the EU market. However, the country has yet to overcome internal economic difficulties such as its high unemployment rate, low FDI influx and slow economic growth.

## Public support for the EU might decline

Macedonia's EU and NATO integration has gained the support of all political parties and around 90 percent of citizens. The peak of public enthusiasm for EU membership coincided with the awarding of EU candidate status to Macedonia. However, should NATO membership and EU accession negotiations be

prolonged much further, Euro-scepticism might grow accordingly. According to the Gallup Balkan Monitor, in autumn 2008 (after the Bucharest NATO summit), Macedonians' trust in NATO and the EU was at 66 percent and 57 percent respectively. Around 66 percent of Macedonians considered EU membership as positive for their country. In the context of the prolonged accession process, an internal drive for reform is needed in Macedonia. It is very important to build further consensus around European integration and parliamentary reforms, as public support for EU membership could well decline, as has happened in Croatia where, according to the Gallup poll in 2008, only 29 percent of citizens saw positive value in EU membership.

Integration into NATO is viewed as a symbolic step on the path towards the European Union, hence why the results of the Bucharest summit could affect public opinion on the EU issue too. NATO accession is regarded as proof that transformation has been achieved in the spheres of politics and security.

## Regional circumstances remain troubled

Kosovo's statehood is very fragile, Serbia is struggling to overcome national resentments on the road to the EU, and Bosnia and Herzegovina urgently need a constitutional reform to ensure the country's integrity. Despite opposition from Serbia, Macedonia has recognised Kosovo's independence, though this independence may pose challenges to state-building and ethnic relations in Macedonia. Some fear that Macedonian Albanians might demand further state decentralisation or even secession. The Kosovo factor, war legacies, troubled relations among neighbours and the shared difficulties of Western Balkan states in their quest for Euro-Atlantic integration result in a continuously uncertain future. The question remains as to whether the EU will be able to offer stronger

engagement in the region instead of the micro-management that is often seen as damaging by the countries in the region.

Regional links are important in the Western Balkans. Regional integration is now promoted within the framework of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) based in Sarajevo, which took over from the Stability Pact in 2008. RCC is aimed at strengthening ownership of regional cooperation by the South Eastern European countries and also serves as a framework for the support of European and Euro-Atlantic integration.

## What will the Spanish EU presidency do?

According to the Spanish government, the forthcoming Spanish presidency of the EU in the first half of 2010 will be 'very Balkanic'. The recent visits of the Spanish foreign minister, Miguel Angel Moratinos, to Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina should be regarded as securing this promise. Spain is anticipating a busy agenda for the Western Balkans over the next year. The queue for candidate status is getting longer with Montenegro and Albania waiting for positive outcomes to their membership applications, submitted in 2008 and 2009 respectively. Croatia is expected to conclude accession negotiations soon. Moreover, the visa issue could be resolved during the Spanish presidency.

Indeed, Spain, as a traditionally pro-enlargement and pro-deepening country, has the potential to energise the EU enlargement process. However, there are reservations that Spain is not a very active or relevant actor in the Western Balkans. Furthermore, in contrast to most EU members, Spain's position on the Kosovo issue is a challenge for the Spanish EU presidency's engagement in the region.

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