



**Macedonia and the Western Balkans Awaiting the 2008 EU
Progress Reports: Back to Basics**

- B R I E F -

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In spite of having accepted Macedonia in 2005 as a candidate state for membership in the European Union, in its two subsequent progress reports the European Commission did not recommend a date for start of the accession talks. Set-back in the country's political reform has postponed the decision of the Commission to propose the start of negotiations. However, in order to speed up Macedonia's pace towards a next step in its EU integration, the Union handed to the Macedonian government in March 2008 a Roadmap with eight benchmarks, once fulfilled, would lead to setting a date on start of accession talks for membership. Three months after, in the parliamentary elections held on 1 June, the country failed to meet fully the European commitments for democratic elections. The elections featured violence, intimidation and ballot stuffing.¹ The result of this was adding the proper conduct of elections as the ninth criterion for start of EU accession talks. Thus, delaying the decision of the Commission to recommend for start of accession talks for another spring.

Facing 5 November 2008, when the Commission is to publish the progress reports, Macedonia and the wider Balkan region are considering the options for speeding up the process of accession to the EU. However, the difficulties faced with regards to political reforms, such as lack of political dialogue between the government and opposition decreases the likeliness that Macedonia will start accession talks in the years to come unless there is consolidated reform process that would be tested in the upcoming elections of March 2009.

Macedonia received its candidacy status in 2005 as an acknowledgement to the reforms the country had made, the implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) being one of the most important ones. This was set out in the Progress Report (Opinion on Macedonia's application for membership) of 2005, which can be considered the most positive one so far. The two subsequent progress reports, of 2006 and of 2007, highlighted Macedonia's reform progress but did not give a green light on setting a date for start of the accession talks due to the set back in the reform progress in Macedonia, including in the

1. Early Parliamentary Elections 1 June 2008 - Final Report. OSCE/ ODIHR's Elections Observation Commission. Warsaw, 20 August 2008. <<http://www.osce.org/item/32619.html>>

implementation of both the Stabilisation and Association Agreement and the Ohrid Framework Agreement. Issues of concern include political dialogue within democratic institutions; effective implementation of the Law on Police; judiciary reforms; anti-corruption; depolitisation and strengthening of the public administration; reducing unemployment in view of creating an employment – friendly environment; improving the general business environment. These issues together with the requirement for proper conduct of elections have become known as benchmarks against which the EU will evaluate the progress of the country towards the start of negotiations.

Three years in row, absence of start of accession talks has had both domestic and European repercussions. Domestically, the government has not been encouraged to undertake required reforms and European wise, the influence of the EU on the domestic political changes has been weakened. These repercussions, coupled with the failure to get to NATO due to the name dispute with Greece, have led to fragmentation in the public opinion on the significance of the integration into EU.

The situation further deteriorated with the Parliament's decision to hold early elections on 1 June 2008. The elections, featuring violence, failed to meet the required standards for conduct of elections. This resulted with adding of a new condition on the EU's "to do" list for start of accession talks, that of proper conduct of elections and implementation of the recommendations of the international community on the issue.²

Failure with this progress report can not be a reason for not pursuing further reforms. What must not be forgotten is that the EU requirements for membership are not the means but an end to itself and Macedonia should abandon its student mentality and follow roadmaps for its own sake.³ Recent efforts undertaken to amend the constitution on the part of elections of the President by decreasing the required threshold from 50% to 40% of the total voter turn out, is the right step. More efforts will need to be undertaken for consolidating the State Elections Commission in its professionalism and independence. Free, fair and peaceful elections and functional political dialogue in the democratic institutions are criteria appropriate to a country which is to sign a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the Union and not to a country candidate for membership awaiting start of negotiations. Thus,

2. *Ibid.*

3. Analytica. *Of Homework and Roadmaps: How to Speed up EU Integration of Macedonia*. Skopje: Analytica, March 2008. <<http://www.analyticamk.org/files/ReportNo10.pdf>>

additional efforts will need to be undertaken to calm down political climate as both the presidential and municipal elections is expected to feature bitter competition among the political rivals.

There are two big minuses which stand out. One of the minuses is on the area of promotion of a constructive and inclusive dialogue, in particular in areas which require consensus among all political parties. The many blockages in the parliament, boycott instead of dialogue and clear inability for reaching a consensus on issues of outmost and strategic importance for the country, as well as the obvious dysfunctional cohabitation contribute to creating an image of an instable political climate in Macedonia, as well as doubt in the democratic processes in the country. The other minus refers to the conduct of the June 2008 parliamentary elections. The low level of political culture, level of irregularities, as well as inability to maintain a peaceful atmosphere on elections day which culminated with a person being shot dead (in spite of the circumstances), are simply things which an EU candidate country must not allow to happen.

Is there more to these eight plus one benchmarks?

Aside from these nine benchmarks, there are issues whose influence on Macedonia's EU start and course of accession talks can not be disregarded. These include first and most of all Macedonia's relations with Greece and the resolving of the name dispute. It is more than obvious that the name dispute has entered the list of preconditions for Macedonia's membership in the EU. Thus, a solution on the name dispute has become a must for Macedonia's integrations. However, it is not expected to influence the start of accession talks and the liberalisation of the visa regime.

Additionally, EU's internal preparedness for enlargement is always a factor to be taken into consideration (in spite of Europe's firm determination that the Western Balkans has its certain future in the Union), as well as its internal problems and other priorities – such as the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty, the international financial and economic crisis, the Georgia situation, and soon we can also add here the forthcoming elections for the EU Parliament. However, as can be seen from Croatia's example, if a country maintains a steady reform course and progress, it can most certainly count on a secure place for start of accession talks.

What after the 5th of November? Macedonia and the Western Balkans

Croatia is expected to complete the negotiations in 2009, and to be soon afterwards admitted in full membership as EU's 28th Member State. This will move Europe's borders to Bosnia and Herzegovina and further into the heart of the Balkans, a progress which is worth to be noted.

Serbia is to accelerate its pace towards Europe, as soon as it resolves the issues of cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and with the status of Kosovo, including its relations with the EULEX mission in Kosovo. Main reforms on Serbia's way, aside from these two issues, are fighting organized crime and corruption, reform of the judiciary as well as progress in improving the business climate. **Montenegro's** challenges are improving its administrative capacities, strengthening the rule of law, fighting crime and corruption. **Bosnia and Herzegovina** will need to undergo deep institutional reform processes, having the disputes in the tripartite presidency as the main obstacle on Bosnia's road to the EU. **Albania** also has a lot more to do on its road to the EU. It will have to deal with rule of law and fight against organized crime and corruption.

As can be noted, from the all western Balkan countries, 5 November will feature progress only in the case of Croatia. However, what all the countries from the western Balkans are hoping for is the visa liberalisation in 2009. A recommendation for abolishing of visas for Macedonia's citizens might be one of the positive news which Macedonia is going to receive from the EC on the 5 November.