



**Of Homework and Roadmaps:
How to Speed up EU Integration of Macedonia**

- B R I E F -

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Critical Times

The last couple of months have been eventful and turbulent for Macedonia and the entire Balkan region. The status of Kosovo is being resolved after a decade of continuous international presence, there is a pending NATO summit in April where the members of the Adriatic Charter expect to receive membership invitations, the negotiations over the name dispute between Macedonia and Greece entered an intense, perhaps final, stage and the European Commission started negotiations on visa-free regime with Serbia and Macedonia. With so much going on, the focus and attention of political leaders can be easily diverted from the tasks and duties related to EU integration towards short-term daily-politics issues.

EU integration is a strategic priority for Macedonia and other Balkan countries and reform efforts must not be stalled, especially in a critical period for the region such as this. This Brief outlines a couple of guidelines Macedonian leadership could follow and several traps that the Macedonian leadership needs to avoid in order to speed up Macedonia's journey on the road to EU and achieve one of our most important foreign-policy goals. Drawing on the EU Enlargement Strategy principles, this brief discusses how the new enlargement principles can be used by Macedonia in order to improve its performance towards EU integration.

Clear Communication

In 2006, the European Commission (EC) adopted an Enlargement Strategy which listed the new principles of enlargement policy: rigorous conditionality, credible membership promise and clear communication with the public. Those principles, which are to guide the EU enlargement policy in the next several years, were reiterated with the latest update of the EC Enlargement Strategy in 2007. And while they are meant to serve as guidelines for the EU and strengthen enlargement policy in the face of recent challenges, some reflection over them would be helpful for the domestic leadership as well.

The EC issues annual Progress Reports which evaluate the progress that candidate states make in fulfilling membership requirements and European and Accession Partnerships, which set out the short- and mid-term priorities that need to be addressed by the governments. In addition to this, and aiming to assist Macedonian efforts to open accession negotiations after receiving two critical Progress Reports in 2006 and 2007, an additional, so called 'Road Map' (or Benchmarks) document is being prepared by the Commission which would list eight points – reform areas/issues – that must be fulfilled in the short-term before Macedonia is awarded a date for starting accession negotiations. Those eight points are not kept a top secret – the government, the media and the public all know about them. If anything, the EU can not be accused of being unclear about its requirements – the ball is now in the Macedonian court.

The EC demands that before starting accession negotiations Macedonia should:

- Implement fully the provisions and obligations from the Stabilization and Association process;
- Promote constructive political dialogue, especially in areas requiring political consensus;
- Show sustainable track-record of judicial reforms;
- Undertake continuous anti-corruption measures;
- Pursue public administration reforms; and
- De-politicization of recruitment and advancement in the civil service;
- Prepare measures for increasing employment;
- Create business environment favourable for investments.

These requirements are not new – they have been on the agenda for quite a long while. They are not even specific to Macedonia – similar requirements and criteria were set for other acceding states. What Macedonian leadership should focus now on is how to achieve these requirements quickly and effectively. Below are several recommendations about how to proceed.

Following the EC practice, the government needs to be **clear about what should be done and what has been done** in the above priority areas. Maintaining clear and regular communication both with the EU and with the public will keep the public informed and allow for their increased participation and scrutiny of the process, while presenting a good argument to the EC. A document similar to EC Road Map, published before the annual evaluation of the EC, will assist the EU in its efforts and spare the public from guessing and media speculations about the contents of the next Progress Report.

Clear communication with the public would mean greater inclusion of the wider population in the process of EU integration. The elites who run the process, in addition to being transparent about their achievements, in their programmes and reports they **need to collect and include the feedback of the direct beneficiaries** from EU programmes and projects implemented in Macedonia. The youth, the students, the farmers, the researchers and all others involved in EU sponsored projects have valuable experiences and opinions that can serve as indicators of the needs of the wider population. Since the ultimate reason behind EU membership is the benefit for the citizens, there needs to be an institutional channel for gathering and incorporating their feedback in official policies and strategies. Thus, the EU integration will also become more democratic.

Rigorous Conditionality

The ‘stick and carrot’ tactics of the EU have proved especially effective in relations with candidate (and potential candidate) countries of the western Balkan countries. As a reward for successfully implemented reforms at home, the EU grants some benefits (financial assistance, visa facilitation and liberalization etc.) to the aspiring state. Apart from the final ‘reward’ – full membership in the EU – there are many ‘intermediate’ rewards that can be gained: visa-free regime, political and financial support for reforms, access to markets and preferential trade relations, etc.

Considering that full membership to the EU is not likely in the short-term, the Macedonian government can **pick several ‘intermediate’ goals and focus on achieving those in the short-term**. This would give the public a taste of EU membership and keep them wanting

more, while avoid frustration over the prolonged accession into the EU. Success in short-term goals is an electorate-friendly strategy and thus governments would not be discouraged from pursuing EU integration goals even though final accession into the EU may not occur within a single government's term. Finally, fulfilling conditions set for 'intermediate' rewards will show the EU that Macedonia has the capacity and political will to work towards fulfilling membership criteria and is a serious candidate for EU membership.

However, we must draw attention to a potential trap when thinking about EU membership in terms of conditionality. One must not mistake the conditions set by the EU for a temporary hardship that has to be endured before a goal is achieved. **Fulfilling EU requirements for membership is not the means but an end in itself.** Otherwise, if EU conditions are understood in instrumental terms, the reforms in the judiciary, public administration, economy etc., will not last longer than the day when Macedonia becomes an EU member. Those reforms are not only homework that needs to be done in order to get a good mark; they are the only way towards functioning democracy and economic development. As such, fulfilling them is a double incentive for every government: first, to become member state of the EU; and second, more important, to contribute to the overall well-being of the population through consolidating democracy and improving economic performance.

Credible Promise

As early as the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003, the EU promised the Western Balkans a 'European perspective', a provision that has been many times repeated by Balkan politicians and EC officials when discussing EU membership prospects for Western Balkans states. By now, the EU future of the Western Balkans is seen as certain – the question is 'When?' not 'If?' The last Enlargement Strategies of the EC also confirm the EU's commitment to integrating the Western Balkans, as the only way to bringing lasting stability and democracy in this region.

In the period before formal accession to the EU, the promise and commitment of the EU towards the Western Balkans can be used for **building a European identity among the Macedonian population**, or rather reconciling Macedonian with European identity. While

at first this seems unnecessary, especially in a situation when both politicians and academics are engaged in discussing the European nature of Macedonian culture, history and identity, a deeper glance would reveal a different truth.

The last decades of being separated from the EU by a Schengen wall and not clear prospects with concrete dates in joining the EU, led to a distinct line between ‘us’ in Macedonia and ‘them’ in EU in the minds and hearts of Macedonian citizens. The entire process of EU integration, fulfilling EU requirements, meeting EU standards, all testifies to being not quite European yet. But having a firm commitment to joining the EU can contribute to building an image of the EU as a partner rather than a teacher who only gives out homework. Perhaps this is the most important step that Macedonia needs to make on the road to EU – abandon the ‘student’ mentality and follow the roadmaps for its own sake.

Conclusions

The slow progress of EU integration can be de-motivating and governments can get consumed in short-term political priorities demanding immediate attention. Yet the strategic nature of EU integration for Macedonian foreign policy commands continuous efforts in this area. This brief suggests several steps that can be taken without major resource reallocation but which can contribute to accelerated EU integration of Macedonia. Drawing on the European Commission’s Enlargement strategy principles and tools, we suggest that Macedonia adopts the three pillars of EU enlargement policy: clear communication, rigorous conditionality and credible membership promise, and apply these tools in the domestic context. The Commission’s tools can be utilized as engines of faster integration of Macedonia in the EU.