

Chance that should not be missed – unblocking Macedonia's EU integration

"For the fourth time the European Council did not set a date for accession talks with Macedonia. Yet, this time the conclusions differ and are slightly more aligned to Macedonia's position than those in the past. These days understandably, Macedonia's general public is occupied with Bulgaria's "backstabbing", Fule's tweet mentioning Skopje instead of Macedonia, counting who was in favour and against for starting accession negotiations among member states etc. In this blurry picture EU's Enlargement Commissioner Stefan Fule diplomatically reminded the authorities in Skopje that they should have another look at the conclusions from the European Council before rushing into conclusions by saying:

"I suggest better reading of the conclusion and you would see that it creates clear framework, according to which if the country delivers reforms, including those related to good neighbourhood relations and the name dispute, there is a very good perspective."¹

And indeed, emotions aside, a clearer reading of the conclusions for Macedonia would provide an understanding of the more prominent role the European Commission assumes in moving Macedonia towards accession negotiations. The conclusion for Macedonia states that in order for the European Council to provide decision to open accession negotiations it will look into a report published by the European Commission in Spring 2013 into the following areas: 1) implementation of reforms as part of the High Level Accession Dialogue, 2) steps taken to promote good neighbourly relations and 3)

steps to reach a negotiated and mutually accepted solution to the name issue.²

If Macedonia's reform path under the High Level Accession Dialogue continues to showcase positive results as it has been noted in the last years' progress report the Commission will mainly remain busy in assessing good neighbourly relations (in other words relations with Bulgaria) and some movement regarding the name dispute with Greece.

The novelty, which Fule highlighted, is that the European Council in this text has managed to transfer the portfolio of good neighbourly relations from a relatively uncharted area being arbitrarily assessed to the Commission's portfolio. So far good neighbourly relations have not been addressed directly nor measured for that matter. There are however certain elements of assessment of good neighbourhood relations present in the annual progress reports that the Commission prepares for the enlargement countries under the section covering Political Criteria. Ever since 2009 when Macedonia received a recommendation by the European Commission to start accession negotiations it was clearly and repeatedly stated that the recommendation is based on the fulfilment of the political criteria, including maintaining good neighbourly relations. There is no reason to believe that the European Commission will move away from its firm detachment from political pressure, something that has been showcased many times before as in the case of the visa liberalisation and the High Level Accession Dialogue.

Time wise, Macedonia has around three months in order to ensure a positive assessment by the Commission. If the Commission underlines progress then it is more than certain that Greece's veto position would be tightened and another Greek and/or Bulgarian objection would not enjoy popular support among member states.

This can be seen as an opportunity for Macedonia's diplomacy to finally present itself in its finest, mainly because every single step in relations with Bulgaria and Greece will be recorded and in three months time put on the table. There is no room for making uncalculated moves. Macedonia can start by repacking the comprehensive list of proposals it

sent to Athens in July 2012, which as such did not receive any response back. These included: high level ministerial meetings, signing a declaration of friendship and cooperation, joint police and military cooperation, opening three new border crossings etc. Additionally Macedonia's authorities can (this time) officially reiterate their willingness to negotiations over the name of the country excluding nationality and language. This moves the ball to the Greek side simply because it will be obliged to either greet this move or reject it. The latter would make Athens uncooperative and seen as breaching its obligations under international law.

Following the recent exchange of letters between Bulgaria and Macedonia expressing the readiness of the two countries to sign an agreement on good neighborly relations, a joint committee tasked on working on the draft text should be established as soon as possible and such an agreement should be signed in the spring 2013. Lastly, Macedonia should make the most out of its chairmanship of the South Eastern European Process in 2013 and organize high-level meetings (either Heads of States or Foreign Ministers) by spring 2013 addressing some of the priorities listed under the Macedonian chairmanship such as cross border cooperation.

¹ Kostovska, I. and Bozinovska, Z. 2012. Dnevnik. December 12.

(<http://www.dnevnik.com.mk/?ItemID=74ADA9CA30DC2944ADF93814CF609F66> (unofficial translation))

² Knaus, G. 2012. "Macedonia and the EU council conclusions – a small but important step forward." European Stability Initiative, December 13.

(<http://www.esiweb.org/rumeliobserver/category/enlargement/>)

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