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## **NORTH MACEDONIA'S EU BID IS BOND TO FREEZE – AGAIN**

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North Macedonia has been an official candidate for European Union (EU) membership since 2005. Throughout the past 15 years, the country has encountered a myriad of obstacles and interferences, of both technical and political nature, on its way to full European accession. It has stumbled and endeavoured through government-backed illiberal ventures, decades-long regional political disputes, and enlargement-sceptical doctrines. Only now, just when its official accession negotiations have been opened, a new handicap is set to hinder North Macedonia's accession process.

In 2006, only one year after being awarded EU candidate status, North Macedonia was opening a new political chapter under the administration of right-wing party VMRO-DPMNE, led by young technocrat Nikola Gruevski. As PM, Gruevski steadily embraced a nationalist agenda with policies that were slowly steering away from the ideal of liberal democracy and progressively pursuing illiberal tendencies. The country's prospects of joining the EU were diminishing, hence the government's degree of accountability to Brussels became more and more limited.

Gruevski's time at the helm came to an end in 2016. A [wiretapping scandal involving government officials](#) triggered an unprecedented, months-long political crisis that paved the way for snap elections in December that year. Although VMRO-DPMNE claimed a tight win at the polls, it failed to gather the necessary parliamentary majority. This gave the chance to the opposition, led by centre-left party SDSM, to assemble a coalition and strike a government deal with the support of a few Albanian-minority parties. [SDSM leader Zoran Zaev was accordingly sworn in as PM in May 2017](#) and has been in power since then.

Even with Gruevski out of the picture, however, North Macedonia's European course remained stagnant. Ever since the country's independence in 1991, the most conspicuous obstacle to its swift Euro-Atlantic integration process had been its name dispute with neighbouring Greece. For almost three decades, Athens had systematically blocked Skopje's successive attempts for accession into the EU (and NATO) in retaliation for the latter's constitutional use of the name 'Macedonia'—which, according to Greece, hid irredentist ambitions over its northernmost region of Macedonia.

In stark contrast to the years of diplomatic stagnation under VMRO-DPMNE, when relations with Athens had been neglected, things took a sharp turn after Gruevski's deposal. The new Zaev government launched talks with its Greek counterpart, the Syriza administration led by PM Alexis Tsipras, in an attempt to reach a solution for the name dispute. A deal was struck after a few rounds of meetings, providing for the [signing and entry into force of the so-called Prespa Agreements](#)—under which the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) would be renamed North Macedonia. Greece subsequently pledged to drop its opposition to Skopje's Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

Thanks to the deal with Athens, North Macedonia was able to enter NATO by March 2020. Almost at the same time, the EU27 authorized the launching of enlargement negotiations with Skopje—a promise that had not come at an easy price. The EU Member States' decision to start accession talks had been pending for nearly two years since the Prespa Agreements were signed, but it was delayed due to the reiterated opposition of France. [The Macron administration had been vetoing North Macedonia's successive accession attempts since 2018](#) under claims that the EU needed to undergo deep internal reforms before even considering enlargement.

The final breakthrough did not arrive until late 2019. In a surprising turn of events, the standstill stoked by Macron's opposition seemed to soften with France's publication of a *non-paper* that mapped out a set of technical measures to reform the enlargement process. Acknowledging that these prerequisites had to be considered if negotiations with Skopje were to prosper, the European Commission (EC) diligently developed a new enlargement methodology, largely based on the content of the French document. [This revamped methodology was presented and approved in early 2020](#), allowing for the opening of accession talks with North Macedonia. Leaving behind a decade of growing illiberalism, having overcome Greece's veto and (only temporarily) circumventing France's scepticism, EU accession is still proving a hard nut to crack for North Macedonia.

Bulgaria is now the pebble in Skopje's shoe. Sofia has in many recent occasions threatened to veto the holding of the first intergovernmental EU accession conference with North Macedonia if several disputes over history, language and identity involving the two nations are not cleared out. A large share of the disagreements between Bulgaria and North Macedonia emerge from both countries' shared historical baggage, including the uniqueness of the Macedonian language—which Sofia considers to be of Bulgarian origin—and the disputed national heritage of revolutionary hero Goce Delcev. As things currently stand, Sofia insists, [Skopje would have to recognize “the Bulgarian origin and roots” of the Macedonian nation](#). Germany, as current holder of the EU Council presidency, has been [visibly proactive in pushing for a diplomatic solution to the conflict](#) so that Skopje will be able to take its first steps down the integration road. The current state of affairs, as far as Bulgaria's entrenched position is concerned, is however likely to make these hopes flounder if a compromise is not reached before the year is over.

The many symbolic gestures of political *rapprochement* between North Macedonia and Bulgaria in recent years, like the [bilateral friendship treaty signed in 2017](#) and the ongoing joint chairmanship of the Berlin Process regional initiative, seem to be far gone. Instead, a shared historical *acquis* is being instrumentalized and misused as a bargaining chip to hinder the domestic reform process of an EU candidate.

The government in Sofia should know (and do) better. The deliberate politicization of the enlargement policy for chauvinistic purposes—and, even more so, from Bulgaria's position of superiority as a Member State—is a mistake susceptible of setting a dangerous precedent. It is yet to be seen whether Sofia's knee on the neck will end up choking Skopje's aspirations for EU membership—and, most importantly, whether the price to pay will be of an irreparable kind.

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