

## Accession Log

### ENTRY #1

# WHAT WILL THE YEAR 2018 BRING?

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#### ABOUT ACCESSION LOG

ACCESSION Log is the new tool, designed and applied by EUROTHINK - Centre for European Strategies, to oversee and assess track record of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, EU-related policy making, implementation of the urgent reform priorities, and regular political dialogue between Macedonia and the European Union, in other words - Macedonia's accession in the EU. ACCESSION Log will also attempt to analyse key events, such as: meetings of the EU Council, meetings of the European Council and other high level meetings; various documents published by the EU and related to its enlargement policy, as well as global developments that affect EU policies and, consequently, policies in the Republic of Macedonia. Finally, ACCESSION Log will closely follow other processes, policies, documents and events related to Macedonia's paramount priority on joining the EU and NATO.

Under individual entries, ACCESSION Log will analyse, determine benchmarks, propose policy options and advocate for particular solutions. Log entries are envisaged as brief reviews on relevant topics, based on analysis of:

- data obtained from EUROMETER, i.e. field surveys conducted by other organizations;
- data obtained from other research and analyses conducted by EUROTHINK, i.e. other organizations;
- statements obtained as part of structured interviews with relevant interlocutors, focus group discussions, and EUROTALK sessions;
- documents of the European Union, the European Commission and/or governments of EU member-states, NATO and its members, and documents of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia;
- media news and reports in the Republic of Macedonia and EU member-states.

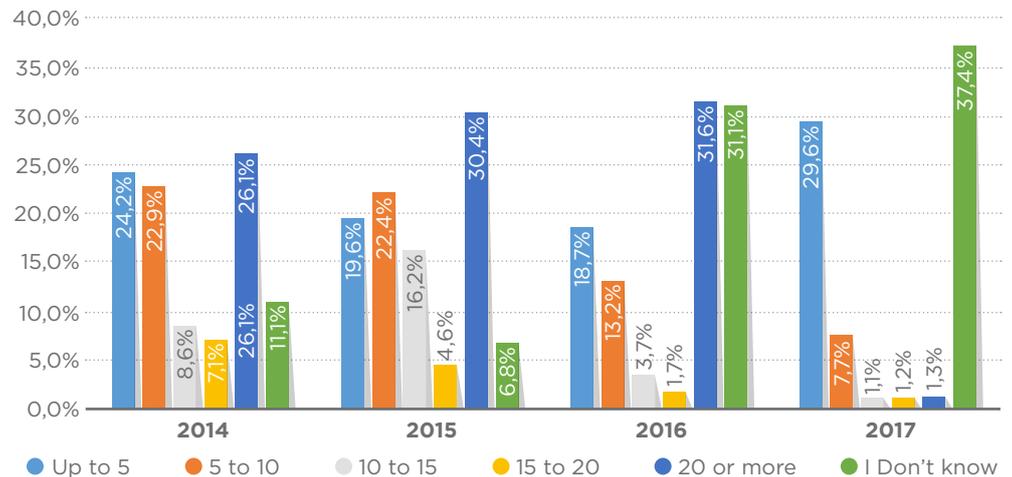
## REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA: MEMBER OF NATO AND THE EU

Formation of the government on 31<sup>st</sup> May 2017 marked the start of the exit from the protracted political crisis. After its formation, the new government changed the second strategic priority from “*Integration of the Republic of Macedonia in the EU and NATO*”<sup>1</sup> to “*Republic of Macedonia – Member of NATO and the EU*”.<sup>2</sup> Although this might seem a merely cosmetic change, deeper analysis thereof reveals it is a matter of change in substance. Hence, it becomes clear that the promise for EU and NATO membership is not distant vision for the current government, rather necessary commitment and high agenda item.

That becomes evident from the fact that the new government intensified its activities to attain this strategic priority, by taking several steps of crucial importance, those being: 1) improved relations with neighbouring countries; 2) “new” initiative for resolution of the name dispute; 3) intensified international communications with member-states (at all levels); and - as guarantee of success - 4) renewed reform process, by adopting and implementing *Plan 3-6-9*.

## THE RETURN OF OPTIMISM

### How long would it take Macedonia to join the EU?



This commitment, together with the reform process and dedication demonstrated thereto, has contributed to improved image of and international community's satisfaction with the new government. Learning from the past, citizens were much more cautious in their assessment of government performance and upheld much more realistic expectations. However, plenitude of acclaims for the government's success, the international community's euphoria and the continuous praise of initiatives and reforms taken, within short period of time brought about increased optimism in the country as well. Quite understandably, citizens' expectations are now higher and different from those upheld just one year ago. In particular, if by last year almost one-third of citizens (30.40% in 2015 and 31.60% in 2016) expected that Macedonia could join the EU within a period of **more than 20 years**, the most recent survey results show that the share of such answers accounts for insignificant 1.30%, due to the increase to almost one-third of answers whereby citizens expect that Macedonia could join the EU in the next **5** years (18.70% in 2016 and 29.60% in 2017). Such optimistic

<sup>1</sup> 2011-2015 Work Program of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Skopje, July 2011, pg. 2, available at: [http://arhiva.vlada.mk/files/Programa\\_zarabota\\_na\\_Vladata\\_na\\_Republika\\_Makedonija\\_za\\_periodot\\_2011-2015\\_godina.pdf](http://arhiva.vlada.mk/files/Programa_zarabota_na_Vladata_na_Republika_Makedonija_za_periodot_2011-2015_godina.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> 2017 Work Program of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Skopje, August 2017, pg.2, available at: [http://vlada.mk/sites/default/files/programa/2017-2020/Programa\\_Vlada\\_RM\\_Juni\\_Dekemvri\\_2017.pdf](http://vlada.mk/sites/default/files/programa/2017-2020/Programa_Vlada_RM_Juni_Dekemvri_2017.pdf)

view about the future could be wind in the back for most reform processes, but in absence of being based in reality and with limited quantity of information, it will become a serious problem. As taught by events from the recent past, failed expectations of citizens are liable to abuse, thus pushing the country into new cycle of instability and providing fertile ground for democracy backslide.

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## 2018: YEAR OF THE CHANCE

Internal initiative for reforms and the state's improved image and standing within the international community are promising that 2018 could be the year of significant changes in terms of the enlargement process and shifts within the accession process. Hence, 2018 could be "**year of the chance**", while the combination of reform initiatives, improved image and future development of events leads us to two possible scenarios.

The first, i.e. the best case scenario for this 2018 is called "**Camel through the Eye of Needle**" and assumes that above-elaborated context, combined with additional external pressure and support from several key member-states, would bring about resolution of the name dispute or at least resolution framework in place. That would allow effectuation of the recommendation to open accession negotiations and start of the screening process. The second scenario is called "**Betrayed Expectations**" and assumes success in terms of reform delivery, but failure to resolve the name dispute. That would prevent effectuation of the recommendation to open accession negotiations, resulting in consequentially decreased intensity of reform activities and public disappointment that might go as far as having "*SDMS turned into VMRO*", and ultimately leading to entanglement in new negative cycle that would resemble the situation in the aftermath of NATO Summit in Bucharest.

Key difference between the first and the second scenario concerns resolution of the name dispute. By now, there should be no individuals that remain unclear of the fact that the name dispute is not formal part of NATO and EU accession process, but membership in both organizations depend exclusively on its resolution. However, making an equation between these processes goes as far as individuals from all sectors of government, opposition and the civil society being firmly convinced that "*Macedonia might not have implemented any of reforms planned, but should it find solution to the name dispute, the EU Council could still grant the country date to start accession negotiations*". Nevertheless, one must not forget that the name dispute is a completely separate negotiation process, led under auspices of the United Nations. In that, when it comes to the name dispute, common logic of international relations implies that Macedonia could do all within its power, could take all necessary steps, but still fall short of solution. Given the specificities of this negotiation process and its impact on NATO and EU membership, as well as the fact that it represents a form of parallel process, it could be concluded that NATO, and in particular EU membership, will be based on steps 1, 3 and 4, i.e.: 1) improved relations with neighbouring countries; 3) intensified international communications with member-states (at all levels); and 4) renewed reform process, by adopting and implementing the *Plan 3-6-9*.

## THREE EVENTS TO LOOK FORWARD IN 2018

Having in mind survey results of 2017 EUROMETER, it becomes more that obvious that the public's expectations are closely tied with to the best case scenario for 2018 called **“Camel through the Eye of Needle”**. For this scenario to become reality, all conditions need to be meet and all puzzle pieces need to be in their place, so that we could expect resolution of the name dispute. Afterwards, and as consequence thereof, we could expect start of accession negotiations with the European Union and membership invitation for NATO. Awaiting final and full realization of the best case scenario, we need to be aware of three forthcoming events and to closely follow development of events:

1. publication of the new EU Strategy on Enlargement with the Western Balkans (early next week) ;
2. EU-Western Balkans Summit in Sofia (mid-May), and
3. European Council (June).

Success of these three events would determine the outcome of NATO Summit in Brussel, in July 2018, and realization of the scenario **“Camel through the Eye of Needle”**.

### Credible Strategy on Enlargement with the Western Balkans

Change to the methodology on publication of European Commission's reports for the enlargement countries implied that the last Country Reports, and corresponding Enlargement Strategy, were published in November 2016.<sup>3</sup> Many things have changes since and the enlargement – in particular the renewed perspective for the Republic of Macedonia - could be the single success in terms of major strategic issues that the current European Commission can check as delivered by the end of its term. Today, the European Union has not advanced its role as global player compared to four years ago and does not stand any chance to solve problems in the Middle East and thereby the refugee crisis. Hence, **“Credible Strategy on Enlargement with the Western Balkans”**<sup>4</sup> will pave the road to EU membership for all states in the Western Balkan.

The new strategy speaks of EU enlargement with the Western Balkans, putting this process within the new framework on the rule of law. According to what has been published in the media about the new strategy, its timeframe considers 2018 to be the crucial year, due to the possibility to open accession negotiations with Macedonia and Albania, with their formal start in 2019. The enlargement strategy closes its timeframe in 2025, as the year when Serbia and Montenegro, both already engaged in negotiations, could complete their respective EU accession processes.

<sup>3</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/package\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/package_en)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.plusinfo.mk/vest/141963/ekskluzivno-eu-strategija-makedonija-kje-gi-otvori-pregovorite-vo-2019-imeto-uslov>

## The Sofia Agenda

The last EU-Western Balkans high-level meeting took place back in 2003, during the Greek Presidency with the European Union.<sup>5</sup> At the Thessaloniki Summit, heads of state or government from EU member-states reiterated their support to the European perspective of the Western Balkans, declaring that their future is within the European Union. For whole 15 years, the so-called Thessaloniki Agenda for the Western Balkans: Moving towards European Integration<sup>6</sup> was the driving wheel for this process, while Greece maintained its role as leader on the Balkan.

There is an evident need to renew the Thessaloniki Agenda, this time called the Sofia Agenda. In the last 15 years, EU's enlargement fatigue, primarily due to problems faced by number of new member-states, such as the financial and indebtment crisis in Greece and the surge of populism and nationalism in countries from the region, as well as in some EU member-states, has contributed to the loss of this perspective. Therefore, the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Sofia, later this year (May), would serve the purpose of **affirmation of the European perspective and connectivity of the Western Balkans,**<sup>7</sup> and in addition to its positive effect on the Western Balkans, it would provide a chance for emergence of new leadership, in this case of Bulgaria.

## Plan A for Year 2018

Provided that *Plan 3-6-9* yields desired reform results and the government's Plan A for the year 2018<sup>8</sup> is effectuated, the credible enlargement strategy with affirmed European perspective for the Western Balkans brings us to the European Council. Usually, the **enlargement package** is discussed at the first meeting of the European Council after the publication of EC's Progress Reports, together with draft Draft-Conclusions of the EU Council based on EC's Enlargement Strategy and Country Reports. According to EC's new reporting methodology and having in mind that the Enlargement Strategy will be published on 6<sup>th</sup> February, this year the European Council will be able to discuss the enlargement process using both documents and the European Parliament's resolution. Obviously, the European Council's decision will manly depend on resolution of the name dispute with Greece, but all parties involved, including the European Commission, expect Macedonia to be granted date to open accession negotiations in June 2018.

Nevertheless, this year cannot be summed up with these three events only. In January this year, the first meeting between the name dispute negotiators, Adamantios Vassilakis from Greece and Vasko Naumovski from Macedonia, was held under auspices of the United Nations and mediator Mathew Nemetz,<sup>9</sup> followed by the first visit to Macedonia, after long period of time, by NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg.<sup>10</sup> Later that month, the first meeting between Greek and Macedonian Prime Ministers, Alexis Tsipras and Zoran Zaev, took place during the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>5</sup> [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_PRES-03-163\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_PRES-03-163_en.htm)

<sup>6</sup> *ibid* 5

<sup>7</sup> <https://eu2018bg.bg/en/28>

<sup>8</sup> <http://24vesti.com.mk/vladata-za-sega-ne-razmisluva-za-druga-alternativa-osven-da-se-reshi-sporot-so-imeto-godinava>

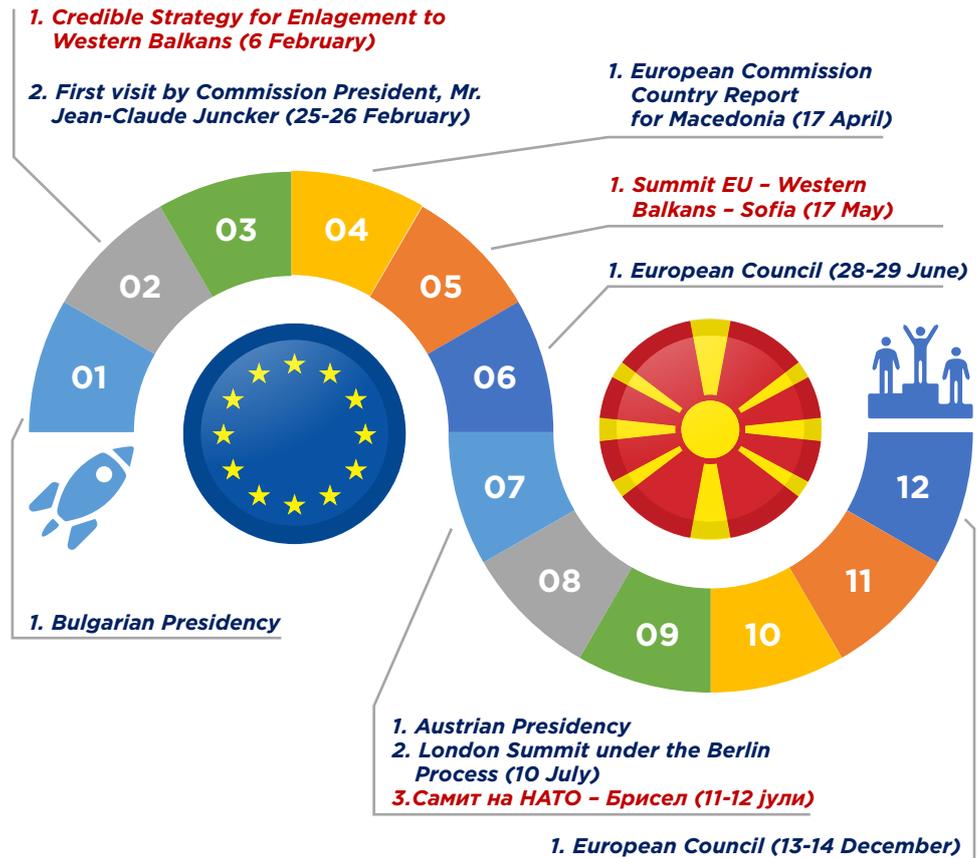
<sup>9</sup> <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/28979940.html>

<sup>10</sup> <http://faktor.mk/video-stoltenberg-go-nareche-zaev-moj-heroj>

<sup>11</sup> <http://a1on.mk/archives/846743>

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## WHAT ELSE DOES THE YEAR 2018 BRING?



In February, when the European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker<sup>12</sup> is announced to make his first visit to Macedonia, MEPs Ivo Vajgl, Eduard Kukan and Knut Fleckenstein are also anticipated to visit the country. Already in March 2018, Macedonia will be visited by the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice President of the European Commission Federica Mogherini,<sup>13</sup> while the official visit by the President of the European Council Donald Tusk is mentioned to happen in May this year.

June meeting of the European Council, overlapping with the Austrian EU Presidency, the London Summit within the Berlin Process and the NATO Summit in Brussels, will most certainly bring about more movements, crucial events, high level meetings and visits. Coupled with the process on finding solution to the name dispute with Greece, it could be expected for this calendar of events to undergo a number of additions. Be that as it may, the name dispute and its dynamics, although essentially linked to Macedonia's NATO and EU membership, are still considered as parallel agenda.

Provided that, on its June session, the European Council sets the date for start of accession negotiations with Macedonia, the country will be faced with yet another - third in a row - parallel negotiation agenda, focused on thorough screening of national legislation's alignment with EU policies, definition of negotiation positions on both sides, EU and Macedonia, and establishing the model of and building the state's structure for accession negotiations.

<sup>12</sup> <http://lokalno.mk/junker-ke-ja-poseti-makedonija-vo-fevruari/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.slobodenpecat.mk/vesti/junker-mogerini-ke-ja-posetat-makedonija/>

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**KNOW AND  
LESS KNOWN  
PUZZLE PIECES:  
INSTEAD OF  
CONCLUSION**

2018 is the year when - for the first time after an entire decade - Macedonia has palpable possibility for actual political breakthrough in terms of the most important problems in its internal and foreign affairs. This is duly mirrored in heightened level of optimism in the public which, fatigued from the protracted political crisis, the futile identity struggle and the rise of authoritarianism, is granting the new government a tacit approval to **roll their sleeves** and start resolving the major issues.

However, the logic of optimism is contrary to the predominant paradigm of international relations, i.e. the **politics of power**. Irrespective of the fact that the government in Macedonia is free of any prejudices, its actual power is limited and could easily clash with the firm positions in Greece, which were already heralded and exceed the level of concessions that the government in Macedonia is ready and willing to make.

Hence, 2018 might also be the year of betrayed expectations and new wave of disappointment. As admitted by many in the government, the lack of Plan B, i.e. state strategy in case the name dispute resolution goes awry, could add oil to the fuel in case of failure. Recent history has taught us that betrayed expectations on the Balkan often create a poisonous cocktail of nationalism, populism and authoritarianism, which is preyed upon by demagogues. Riding the wave of defending the national interests, demagogues push societies into deeper political and social problems.

The opposition, i.e. its new leadership, could have the major role in cutting this Gordian knot, as it demonstrated constructiveness in the course of this process thus far. What remains unclear is whether such behaviour is part and parcel of tactical or strategic considerations, or matter of necessity. Under the **first option** (*tactical considerations*), the seemingly constrictive opposition could use the first crisis situation in the name dispute resolution attempt to gain political points by playing the card of nationalism. Under the **second option** (*strategic considerations*), VMRO-DPMNE has clearly understood the message sent by the majority of citizens that wish to put societal conflicts and divisions behind them and want to see Macedonia navigate calm waters whereby the elites would start dealing with issues related to everyday problems of citizens. In case of the **third option** (*matter of necessity*), VMRO-DPMNE is attempting to redeem its sins from the past with present-day constructiveness and to convert itself into credible partner of the international community, while improving its coalition-making capacity with potential Albanian partners for future government formation.

Be that as it may, what is more than obvious is that VMRO-DPMNE's leadership is facing **bottom-up** pressure. In particular, the alt-right factions, co-opted by the previous party leadership in an attempt to prevent peaceful transfer of power by street mobilization, now demand this political party to fly the flag of national interest and to take lead in mobilizing public support against the name compromise with Greece. Between the hammer and the anvil, behaviour of VMRO-DPMNE's new leadership remains the greatest puzzle in 2018.

**End of entry #1**