

Policy Brief:

WHY EUROPE? WHY NOW?

FIVE REASONS WHY THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL SHOULD SET A DATE FOR OPENING ACCESSION NEGOTIATIONS WITH MACEDONIA

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WHY EUROPE?

The formation of the new government on 31st May 2017 marked the country's exit from the protracted political crisis. The European Commission noted this in its "2018 Communication on Enlargement Policy"¹ by stating that Macedonia "...has, following a difficult period, finally overcome its deep political crisis, with EU and international support."² After its formation, the new government changed its second strategic priority to "Republic of Macedonia – Member of NATO and the EU"³, which signalled a deeper, more substantial change in attitude and political will to execute the long awaited reforms. The new government focused its activities to produce results by the reforms in five key areas⁴:

- 1) **credible elections**, completed at the Local Elections of 2017, and noted in the OSCE-ODIHR Electoral Observation Mission;⁵
- 2) **improved media space**, with significant efforts throughout the year and confirmed by the recent *Freedom House Report*;⁶
- 3) **independent judiciary and rule of law**, where reforms have been initiated, but have yet to deliver results;
- 4) **good neighbourly relations**, in which field Macedonia signed the friendship agreement with Bulgaria in August 2017 and resolved the long-standing dispute over the name issue with Greece through an agreement in June 2018;

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20180417_strategy_paper_en.pdf

² Ibid 1

³ 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

⁴ Introductory remark by H.E. Mrs. Radmila Sekerinska-Jankovska, Minister of Defense and Deputy Prime Minister of the Government of Republic of Macedonia at the Conference "POLICY DEVELOPMENT IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION"

⁵ <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/fyrom/339261>

⁶ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/macedonia>

Summary

This Policy Brief analyses the current state of affairs with regards to the EU Accession of Macedonia, as well as the state of affairs in the European Union when it comes to Western Balkan Enlargement. When analysing the process of Macedonia's EU Accession, the brief takes into account the state of EUphoria in the society in Macedonia and the level of public support for Accession, as well as the findings of the European Commission's **Country Report** published in April 2018. While, the discussion on the state of affairs in the European Union is based on various media reports, as well as the debate at the **Sofia Summit** of May 2018, and the **Credible Strategy for Western Balkan Enlargement** published in February this year. The Policy Brief uses the data from #Eurometer2017 and #Eurometer2018, as well as

the analysis of the three entries of the **Accession Log**, the **Comparative Analysis of the European Commission Country Reports for Macedonia 2014-2018**, as well as media reports and official documents from both, the Government and the European Union. Through the analysis, the brief tries to answer the two crucial questions: **"Why Europe?"** and **"Why Now?"** offering also a list of five reasons why the European Council should set a date for opening Accession Negotiations with Macedonia.

5) **improved inter-ethnic relations** is the policy area in which greater effort is evidently required. The previous governments have actively resisted this.

Additionally, the Government in the past year intensified international communications with member-states at all levels. While the reform process was led in an open, inclusive and transparent manner. The public was encouraged to believe that the promise for EU and NATO membership is not a distant vision. Rather, it constitutes a high priority agenda item for the Government. Recognizing this development, the **EC Country report 2018** uses the phrase: *"...political will to move forward is once again clearly present and a positive change in the political mind-set has been seen across society, the lack of which had been a major impediment to reforms in recent years..."*⁷

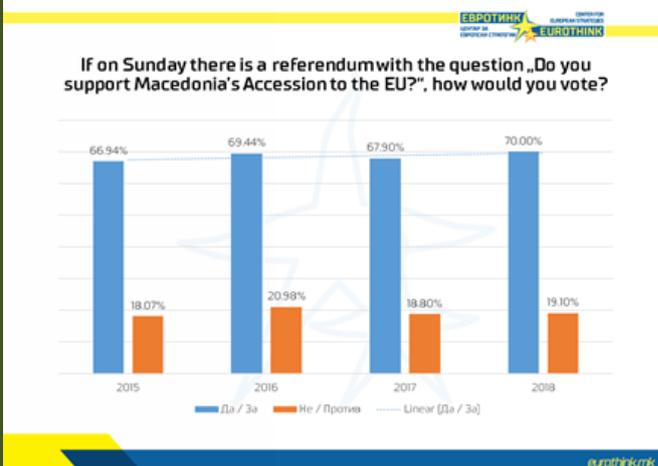
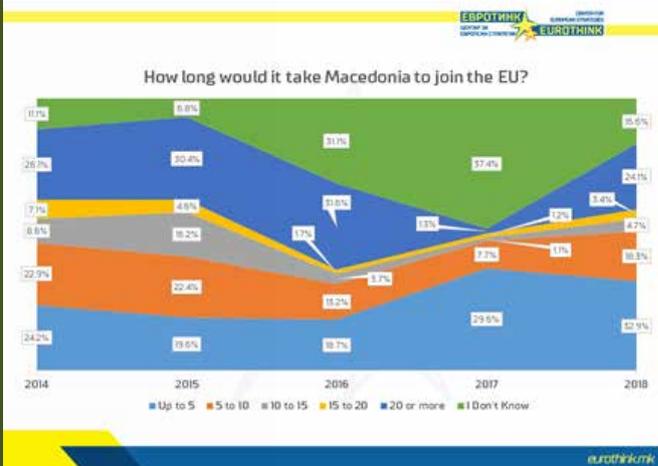
Optimists with experience, or through experience

From long and bitter experience, citizens have become cautious in their assessments and realistic in their expectations, thou not undemanding. The international acclaim for Macedonia's long-delayed progress had the domestic effect of boosting the level of popular optimism. Quite understandably, citizens' expectations are now higher and different from those upheld just one year ago. In particular, in March 2018 the survey of **#Eurometer** on the question "How long would it take Macedonia to join the EU?" established that 51,2% expect for Accession to occur within a ten years' time-frame. On the same question, in November 2017 only 37,3% had the same expectations, while in November 2016 the percentage was even lower. Standing at

31.9%, the percentage of citizens that expected to see Macedonia join the EU in ten years, in November 2016, is slightly lower than the percentage of citizens that expect to see the country as a Member State within five years at the #Eurometer2018 with 32.9%.

Transferring the expectations to support would only lead us to the same conclusion. Namely, support for EU Accession in the last five years has experienced steady growth and shows a trend of fortification around the 70% mark. The Eurometer survey has managed to establish through the question: *"If on Sunday there is a referendum with the question >Do you support Macedonia's Accession to the EU?<, how would you vote?"* that public support for EU Accession in March 2018 stands at 70%, with those opposing it being at 19.10%. This represents a steady growth compared to the year 2014 when we first started measuring it.

The constantly high level of public support for EU Accession, coupled with the optimism existing in the country are the necessary wind in the sails of the reform processes. This is what the European Commission calls *positive change in the political mind-set across society*, and what perfectly answers the question **"Why Europe?"**



⁷ <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20180417-the-former-yugoslav-republic-of-macedonia-report.pdf>

WHY NOW?

Internal initiatives for reforms and the state's improved image and standing within the international community, as well as the significant changes in terms of the enlargement process like the publication of the Credible Strategy for Western Balkans Enlargement⁸, the Bulgarian Presidency and the Sofia Summit are promising that 2018 is the **year of the chance**. On the other hand, the absence of a European perspective, the fatigue of the prolonged crisis in the EU, coupled with the rise of populists and the fortification of illiberal and authoritarian leaders in some Member States seriously endanger EU's image and leverage in the Western Balkans. Therefore, serious engagement by the EU is necessary in order to repair the image it has taken upon itself lately, while working to regain its status as exporter of democracy and to prevent the damage done by other global players in the region. Taking the above-elaborated context, and combining it with the right amount of external pressure/support to bring about the resolution of the name dispute and we are living in the best-case scenario for the year, called **Camel through the Eye of Needle**.

Honesty is the best policy

By now, there is no individual unclear that the name issue is not formally a part of the EU accession process, but it has obstructed it. Therefore, advancing towards the EU depends can only begin with its resolution as the European Commission rightfully notes in its latest report *"Regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations form an essential part of the country's process of moving towards the EU."*⁹ This is a clear sign that the European Commission recognizes the efforts put by Macedonia in improving its relations with the neighbours, i.e. Bulgaria and Greece. Obviously, the principle that our parents taught us all, as children, that "honesty is the best policy" works on international politics and in international relations too. Honest governments, with honest policies set against the slogan that *"it is not about the next elections, but about the next generations"* can compensate in 11 months for a crazy and isolationist period of nearly 11 years. The result of this honest policy was finally visible on 12 June 2018. Over a phone call, Macedonian Prime Minister, Zoran Zaev, and Greek Prime Minister, Alexis Tsipras, agreed on a mutually acceptable solution to the name issue.¹⁰ The agreement on renaming Republic of Macedonia to Republic of North Macedonia with all inherent implications was negotiated and signed by foreign ministers Dimitrov and Kotzias, at Prespa Lake, on 17 June 2018.

We are now in the point where stakes are rather high and Macedonia is finally on the right path to get an invitation to join NATO and successfully manage the burden of the process of negotiating its EU accession. As some of the Member States rightfully point out Macedonia has not implemented many of the planned reforms, and therefore, is certainly not yet ready to join the EU. However, finding a solution to the name dispute is a **game changer**.¹¹

One step forward

Having in mind the survey results of **#Eurometer** 2018, it becomes more that obvious that the public's expectations are tied to what the **Camel** brings **through the Eye of Needle**.

Macedonia is already on a fixed path towards EU Accession. The EU Strategy on Enlargement with the Western Balkans, published in early February listed the

⁸ A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans

⁹ Ibid 7

¹⁰ <http://www.ekathimerini.com/229617/article/ekathimerini/news/the-full-transcript-of-the-greece-fyrom-deal>

¹¹ <https://nezavisen.mk/en/news/2018/05/56922/>

country as a candidate who could open up accession negotiations this year. It used Macedonia as an example to showcase the progress in the region, but also to present the mechanisms it will employ to facilitate its implementation and the common policy. Most importantly, it listed a set of new criteria, which might be called the *Strasbourg Criteria*¹², where Macedonia excelled. The country is the only from the Western Balkans that fully complies with the *Third Strasbourg Criterion*, to achieve a **definitive solution to disputes with neighbours**. Finally, the European Commission with its Country Report for 2018 said that Macedonia has moved one step forward and answered the question “**Why now?**”

To get the full story of that answer, we list its five components.

FIVE REASONS WHY MACEDONIA SHOULD START ACCESSION NEGOTIATIONS

*Number 1: Clear and Unconditional Recommendation*¹³

After a long period, Macedonia again received recommendation to start accession negotiations. Unlike the last recommendation, and especially unlike the recommendation issued in 2016, this year’s recommendation is “clear and unconditional.” The phrase “clear and unconditional” means that the Commission expects the Council to immediately consider it and take positive conclusion by deciding to open accession negotiations. However, this game is Brussels talk and does not matter much to the ordinary citizens. What matters is that the moment it comes.

From 2014 Macedonia faced a protracted political crisis, which, in the words of the European Commission, amounted to the most severe political crisis since the 2001 conflict. This crisis progressively deepened; its resolution was not a simple affair. Only 18 months ago, in its previous report, the European Commission described Macedonia as a captured state. The term applies to ostensibly democratic states hijacked by corruption and narrow personal interests often adopting authoritarian governance methods.

On April 27th last year, an angry mob organized by the incumbent ruling party, VMRO-DPMNE, entered Parliament and threatened the Constitutional order¹⁴, while the country was on the brink of war. A year later, the European Commission notes positive changes in its Country Report. The Report praises the process of reforms, its inclusiveness, and societal dialogue, the political will to resolve disputes with neighbours and the new vision for the future. The difference with the previous report is stark. Today, Macedonia is free society with visible political will for reforms that had been missing in the past.

Nevertheless, the report does not depict Macedonia as a land of milk and honey. On the contrary, it is described in realistic terms as a country facing numerous problems. There is still plenty to be done, but the process is long, and starting it will only generate greater focus on the reforms and more public support.

In that, the most important difference from the last report is the fact that society and institutions do not ignore problems, but address them head on. It is clear for the Government, as much as it is for the EU that Accession will only happen through the Rule of Law. The EU is a partner in the reform process. The Commission

¹² Accession Log – Entry 2 “Credible Strategy for Enlargement with the Western Balkans”, page 4; Namely, the Strategy enlists that with 1) strong political will, the delivery of 2) real and sustained reforms, and 3) definite solutions to disputes with neighbours, these countries could be potentially ready for EU membership in 2025.

¹³ https://kanal5.com.mk/vesti_detail.asp?ID=152327

¹⁴ <http://www.pravda.gov.mk/documents/KRIVICEN%20ZAKONIK%20precisten%20%20tekst.pdf>

recognizes that there is finally will at the top to move forward. It also grasps that the damage done cannot be easily corrected. Finally, in the absence of any genuine regional success story, the chance Macedonia has must be strongly encouraged.

Number 2: Hunger for a Success Story

To continue in the same line, EC's Report stands to witness that Brussels is "hungry" for stories of success. This year marks the end of the term of office for the current composition of the European Parliament and the Commission College. At the European elections in May 2019, all political groups would want to depict themselves as having successfully dealt with all challenges during their mandate. Of course, they would want to leave a legacy of success to their successors. To discuss this in terms of enlargement, but also in the broader sense the success story is exactly here, in Macedonia, and could be attributed to Commissioner Johannes Hahn, High Representative Federica Mogherini, and President of the European Council Donald Tusk. Judging from the intensity of their involvement and the regularity of their visits in the last several years, we can freely speak of dedication and decisiveness to deliver.

In the previously published Credible Strategy on Enlargement with the Western Balkans, all countries in the region are described as systems demonstrating elements of state capture. Hence, the strategy anticipates series of instruments that should eliminate these elements, but it sounds rather paradoxical to expect elites that have captured their states to change their behaviour. In other words, the actual question for the region is how to release the states and capture the momentum. Macedonia's story is quite different. The combination of ambitious and rather initiative-prone foreign policy, packed internal reform agenda, and several practices of the new government have all contributed for Macedonia's image in Brussels to be dramatically changed, giving rise to hope that there are political elites in the Balkan that promote different behaviour. This new hope, and clearly achieved success is what Brussels should generously reward.

Number 3: Dangers and rivals

The 2004 Big Bang was the crowning success of EU Enlargement Policy. This was reflected in the Thessaloniki Agenda, even before reaching the finish line of the Big Bang. However, bilateral disputes, unfair conditionality and bad compromises on the part of the EU affected enlargement in the Western Balkans.

The EU faces significant challenges in the Western Balkans at present. These come from the growth of Euroscepticism throughout the European Union, but also in the Western Balkans, growth of autocratic regimes in Southeast Europe, threats to "European Values" and a breakthrough of Russian interference, as well as Turkish, Chinese and Arab or Gulf influences.

Russian interference in Macedonia is becoming increasingly more visible. The country had its first **Russian Centre**¹⁵ opened in 2016 at the University Saints Cyril and Methodius in Skopje. Since then, there is at least one other cultural centre opened in Bitola, the second largest town in the country, and a private university with two campuses in Bitola and in Sv. Nikole. The *International Slavic University "Gavrilo Romanovich Derzhavin"*¹⁶ has direct cooperation with the Russian Federation, hosts Russian professors and offers dual degree programmes that suggest state

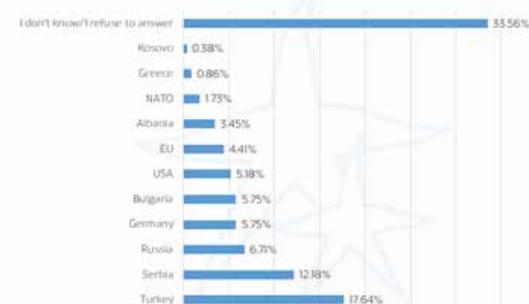
¹⁵ <http://www.kultura.gov.mk/index.php/odnosi-so-javnost/novosti/2341-otvoren-ruski-centar-vo-sostavot-na-skopskiot-univerzitet>

¹⁶ <https://msu.edu.mk/za-univerzitetot/slavjanski-denes/?lang=en>

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FRIENDSHIP

In your opinion, which country or International Organisation is Macedonia's biggest friend?



About:

EUROTHINK

EUROTHINK is a non-profit, non-political, think-tank organization founded in September 2002 year. EUROTHINK members are EU certified trainers of InWEnt Bonn and the Institute for European Policy in Berlin, Federal Republic of Germany; Trainers for writing public policy certified Initiative for Local Government of the Open Society Institute in Budapest; professionals contributing to the accession of Macedonia to the EU and the Europeanization of society. EUROTHINK is supporting Macedonia's accession to the EU and the Europeanization of society through professional training and counseling, development of public policies based on evidence, regional cooperation and advocacy for changes. Since its inception, EUROTHINK has delivered approximately 1,400 days of training for more than 8,000 representatives of public administration, the media, civil society organizations, judges and prosecutors, members of political parties, local administration, etc.. Starting from 2007, EUROTHINK changed its focus from a training institute in the think – tank organization hoping to

funding from Russia. Finally, since the last political crisis in the country, the Russian Foreign Ministry has actively expressed concerns over the political movements in Macedonia, in support of the autocratic government of VMRO-DPMNE. In September 2014, Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov stated that NATO's expansion in the Western Balkans, i.e. with Macedonia and Montenegro is considered by Moscow a provocation.¹⁷ During this year, statements by the Russian MFA or the Embassy in Skopje went as far as to suggest that Macedonia should reconsider joining NATO¹⁸, while advisors to President Putin, Leonid Savin and Aleksandr Dugin visited on a number of occasions a Russian installed political party, Edinstvena Makedonija.¹⁹ Foreign Direct Investment²⁰ from Russia is insignificant. Yet, Russia is perceived as as third biggest friend of the country according to the results of **#Eurometer** 2018. This demonstrates the political salience at low cost of Russia's engagement in Macedonia.

On the side of Turkey, the situation is different since it has significant economic impact, as it appears to be one of the most prominent foreign direct investors.²¹ The economic interests of Turkey are greater than the ones of Russia, but cultural influence is equally big, if not bigger. Cultural influence gains on importance due to the size of the Muslim community in Macedonia, and the recognition of the constitutional name, Republic of Macedonia²², by Turkey and in NATO. This simple fact has the effect of the principle *the enemy of my enemy is my friend*²³.

As we explained before, Macedonia is the success story of the European Union, but having to cope with state capture, and operating under a very thin majority in Parliament poses a serious threat to the irreversibility of the change. Following the discourse of similar illiberal voices from within the EU, like Hungary in particular, local nationalists are using the topics of migration as well as Macedonia's determination to join NATO and the EU to fear monger, instigate hate and create discomfort with the citizens. Such atmosphere is strengthened by foreign influences from global players, such as Russian Federation, Turkey or China, but also by some of EU's own authoritarians²⁴. Macedonia needs to continue its reforms process and its association with western liberal democracies. The irreversibility of the process and the sustainability of the reforms needs to be ensured. The European Union should contribute to this in its own self-interest.

Number 4: Consolidation v. Enlargement

The Credible Strategy on Enlargement with the Western Balkans²⁵ reiterates and reaffirms the European perspective of the Western Balkans, it also does that featuring an honest overview of state-of-affairs in terms of EU enlargement and the future of the enlargement policy and countries in the region. This honest approach indicates that enlargement with the Western Balkans is in the best interest of the European Union: "*This firm, merit-based prospect of EU membership for the Western Balkans is in the Union's very own political, security and economic interest.*"²⁶ Thus, the Union should be able to protect its interests. It should be able to ensure the delivery of what was written in the Strategy and is in the Union's very interest, by

¹⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-balkans-russia-idUSKCN0H01W20140929>

¹⁸ <https://a1on.mk/archives/884967>

¹⁹ <https://a1on.mk/archives/864470>

²⁰ <http://www.stat.gov.mk/Publikacii/3.4.9.01.pdf>

²¹ Ibid 18

²² https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_48830.htm

²³ <http://www.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Whats-in-a-name-Report-poll-on-name-issue-2018.pdf>

²⁴ <https://fokus.mk/kurir-stana-tselosno-ungarski/>

²⁵ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/publications/eu-western-balkans-strategy-credible-enlargement-perspective_en

²⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf

2025, “[...] *the Union must be stronger and more solid.*”²⁷

Starting from the south and moving counter-clockwise, it is Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and Croatia, and across the Adriatic Sea, Italy, share a border with the Western Balkans. Having in mind its geographical position, the whole region is surrounded by EU Member States, thus appearing to be in the centre of the Union. In the online version of the Cambridge Dictionary enlargement is used to explain *the process of something becoming bigger, or being made bigger*,²⁸ while its synonyms are expansion or stretching. This implies territorial enlargement toward the east and with the countries of the Eastern Neighbourhood,²⁹ i.e. Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. However, for the Union to become bigger it need not stretch to the east, but fill in the empty space of the Western Balkans. Therefore, there is no need to consider this enlargement, but simply consolidation.

The European Union should seize the opportunity that presents itself in such a generous manner and the situation previously explained to open up Accession Negotiations with Macedonia. In this manner, it will produce the chilling effect of democratic transition; boost its capacity as exporter of democracy, and promote itself to the Global Player position it wants to achieve by fending off rival powers in its core.

Number 5: Negotiations facilitate EU leverage

The process of EU Accession does not end once Accession Negotiations start. On the contrary, only the negotiations, in average, last nearly seven years. Analysing the “Big Bang” of 2004, and the subsequent enlargement cycles of 2007 and 2013 we could see that the negotiations lasted in average nearly six years, or 70 months. This period includes the period for the ratification of the Accession Treaty by the existing Member States. In the case of Montenegro, the country opened its Accession Negotiations in June 2012, i.e. it has been negotiating full a six years, without prospects of finishing anytime soon. While, when it comes to Serbia, Accession Negotiations were opened in January 2014 and its even further from closing it. If these dynamics were applied to Macedonia, it would turn out that negotiations would probably end in 2024 or a year later as the Credible Strategy projected in February this year. This would give enough time to both, the EU to get institutionally ready³⁰, as well as to Macedonia to get done with the reforms.

Speaking of previous waves of enlargement, it is common knowledge that the European Union’s leverage over an acceding country remains potent only until accession. The conditionality of the whole process and the position of the EU to incentivise the acceding country with the prospect of membership, while at the same time it conditions its further advancement with compliance to specific legislation guarantees EU leverage. On the other hand, the EU only has leverage over an acceding country during the accession negotiations process. Once the negotiations are over, and that country becomes a Member State this leverage stops. There are many examples for this, such as the later enlargements in 2007 with Bulgaria and Romania, and in 2013 with Croatia. However, the clearest examples are Poland and Hungary, who’s democratic transitions in 1989

reduce the apparent lack of expertise in the country in the field of public policy based on evidence that is in line with EU policies. EUROTHINK monitors the accession process and its researches focuses on political criteria, Chapter 23 – Judiciary and Fundamental Rights, and the utilization of European funds. The organization with its work so far has published a number of publications which are available electronically through the portal. EUROTHINK is working with the media in order to improve reporting for the accession process of Macedonia and prepare tools to help them to understand that joining the EU actually is internal rather than foreign policy.



²⁷ Ibid, pg. 18
²⁸ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/enlargement#dataset-business-english>
²⁹ https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/neighbourhood/eastern-partnership_en
³⁰ Ibid 24

facilitated EU Enlargement Policy, and are now testing the resilience to populism and authoritarianism of the European Union.

The report does point to the flaws of Macedonia's reform process, just as the Franco-Dutch Non-Paper.³¹ It is more than clear that there is plenty to be done. However, the process is long, and starting it will increase and sustain the reforms and democratisation momentum, while preserving the influence that the EU has over Macedonia and in general. This is a chance that the European Union should not miss.

³¹ <https://www.libertas.mk/eden-non-pejper-toлку-golema-vreva/>