

North Macedonia: A step closer to EU membership

On 15 October 2019, the General Affairs Council discussed the issue of enlargement as regards Albania and North Macedonia without reaching unanimity (opposition of one EU Member State) on the decision to open EU accession negotiations with these countries. The Council will return to the issue after the European Council meeting on 17-18 October. In line with the 2018 western Balkans strategy, which aimed to inject new momentum into the enlargement process, Ursula von der Leyen, European Commission President-elect, and Josep Borrell, incoming High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and Vice-President-designate of the Commission (HR/VP), have declared the western Balkans to be their priority.

Background

Following the 2003 [EU-Western Balkans Summit](#) confirming the European perspective for the whole region, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia applied for EU membership in 2004. The country was granted EU [candidate status](#) in 2005 and a visa-free travel agreement to the Schengen area in 2009, but accession negotiations remained off limits for Skopje, owing mainly to the dispute with Greece over the country's use of the name 'Macedonia'. However, the entry into force of the [Prespa Agreement](#) in February 2019 resolved this bilateral issue. As a result, not only is North Macedonia about to become the 30th member of the [North Atlantic Treaty Organization](#) (NATO) – subject to ratification by the other signatories, expected by the end of 2019 – it can now also continue on the path towards EU membership. Despite the fact that Russia supported the country's independence in 1992, Moscow has [opposed](#) NATO's expansion in the Balkans, and North Macedonia's gradual alignment with European foreign and security policy. The Russian and Chinese [presence](#) in the Balkans and a return to nationalist rhetoric mean the EU faces an ever-more significant strategic choice. To prepare North Macedonia for accession, the EU has already [allocated](#) €664 million in funding for the 2014-2020 period, focusing on the areas of institution-building, cross-border cooperation, regional development and rural development.

European Commission 2019 country report and follow-up

In 2019, the Commission's [country report](#) recommended opening accession negotiations, as North Macedonia had 'continued to deepen the reform momentum, delivering tangible results in the key areas'. In June 2019, the General Affairs [Council](#) took note of the Commission's recommendations and agreed to reach a clear and substantive decision no later than October 2019. European Council President [Donald Tusk](#) reiterated his support for launching the negotiations. As stated in a [joint letter](#) of 3 October 2019, signed by Presidents David Sassoli, Donald Tusk and Jean-Claude Juncker, and President-elect von der Leyen, the decision to open negotiations is not only about the Union's 'ability to deliver on its promises and look to the future', but also about 'its international role and capacity to protect its interests'. The [Presidency conclusions](#) adopted after the 15 October meeting of the General Affairs Council recall the June 2019 Council conclusions and state that the Council will return to the issue after the European Council meeting of 17-18 October 2019.

European Parliament

Parliament supported the opening of accession talks in a November 2018 [resolution](#). It welcomed the invitation to join NATO as contributing to greater security and stability in south-east Europe. It underlined that proper functioning of the judicial system and measures to combat corruption were of paramount importance. The country's drive to put an end to corruption was recently confirmed when, in August 2019, North Macedonia's chief special prosecutor was arrested and later [accused](#) of taking a reward for illegal influence and misuse of office, in what was referred to as the 'Extortion' scandal.

