

THE FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

Time for resolute action

When I started as Commissioner in charge of enlargement policy five years ago, your country, albeit not the biggest or the richest one, was clearly in the front line of EU integration in the region. The European Commission had recommended opening accession negotiations a year earlier, and our mood was optimistic. Sadly, five years on, that optimism is wearing thin. Negotiations have not been opened yet, political crises recur, and relations with some neighbours are still affected by differences, or have even worsened since 2010. Something is wrong. Time is being lost. The EU accession process is at an impasse.

Unfortunately, the "name issue" with Greece remains unresolved and is having a direct and adverse impact on your European aspirations. Resolute action by all involved is needed to find a negotiated and mutually acceptable solution. There is no excuse for further delays. Proactive support from EU leaders is equally essential. The European Commission will continue to offer support towards that goal.

I fully understand that the inability to open accession negotiations is frustrating, putting therefore the sustainability of the reforms at risk. I have repeatedly voiced this concern. Yet, the absence of negotiations cannot serve as an excuse for not addressing the very clear internal challenges you have to face. The Commission has repeatedly spelled out these challenges in our progress reports. I have highlighted them in the past years in my numerous discussions with political leaders. To keep the reform process on track and advance it in the absence of accession negotiations, we started the High Level Accession Dialogue in 2012. The aim has been to show creativity and determination to help you moving forward.

Your international reputation has been damaged by recurrent domestic political confrontation. We witnessed two serious political crises in mere two years. It is urgent that both government and opposition take steps to restore political dialogue in parliament. The government is responsible for creating the conditions in which the opposition has the possibility to fully perform its control function. On the other hand, the opposition needs to engage constructively in the democratic process within the institutions and not outside of them.

Among other important issues, there are also serious concerns about politicisation of state institutions and government control over media, including in the context of elections as reported by OSCE/ODIHR.

Political parties and civil society alike also have an important challenge to tackle: more proactive efforts are needed to build trust among different communities. To be successful, they need to be embraced by society as a whole. In a multi-ethnic society, diversity and difference of opinions and traditions are enriching elements and a true treasure. They should be accepted and nurtured as such.

In this difficult context, is there still room for optimism? I do believe so. First, there's the common interest. No one questions that we would all benefit both politically and economically if things moved decisively forward. This should be the motivation for all sides to take action. Second, you are not starting from scratch: the cumulative progress since independence is impressive and the level of alignment with EU legislation is relatively high. Clearly, there is a potential to move and achieve progress again. And now is the time to unlock that potential by clear and committed European determination of all the relevant actors.

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This article is published on the occasion of the publication by the European Commission of its progress report on the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, on 8 October 2014.