

North Macedonia's struggle for EU Accession



Resistance has become the defining characteristic of North Macedonia's long and arduous journey toward European Union membership. For nearly two decades, the country has navigated a complex web of internal reforms, diplomatic disputes, and external pressures, all while struggling to meet the EU's stringent accession criteria. Yet, despite its efforts, North Macedonia finds itself repeatedly blocked, both by its own unresolved tensions and by an EU that seems reluctant to fully embrace the Western Balkans. This persistent resistance—against foreign influence, internal divisions, and an EU that offers more hurdles than hope—continues to shape North Macedonia's fight for a place in Europe's most exclusive club.



Mural in Skopje on Skenderbeg Square, named after the Albanian hero, Gjergj Kastrioti Skenderbeg.

It has been 20 years since the “big bang” enlargement of the European Union (EU) to Central Eastern Europe. The Western Balkan states have been on the radar for EU membership for well over a decade. Now, Ukraine and Moldova are seemingly approaching concrete accession talks, fast tracking the process that some countries have lusted after for years. The accession of Ukraine and Moldova to the EU is still years away but it does appear to the Western Balkans as unfair treatment.


At the heart of the EU’s enlargement process are the Copenhagen criteria, designed to ensure that new members are stable, democratic, and compatible with the Union’s values and standards. Historically, the EU has employed a ‘carrot and stick’ approach to encourage countries both inside and outside the Union to comply with its requirements. However, in North Macedonia’s case, the stick has been wielded more frequently than the carrot, eroding the country’s confidence in the EU. Despite efforts to meet these stringent criteria, North Macedonia’s candidacy has dragged on for nearly two decades. Much has been done to meet the EU’s criteria, but internal problems, disputes with neighbouring EU member states, and the influence of foreign powers all add to the unsuccessfulness of North Macedonia accession to the European Union.

This leads to a broader question: do the Copenhagen criteria and other EU

accession rules truly hold consistent value? Examples like Cyprus in 2004, where sovereignty was overlooked, or Bulgaria and Romania in 2007, where concerns about rule of law were brushed aside, suggest otherwise. Such precedents make countries like North Macedonia wonder if their struggles are in vain. This scepticism is further fueled by the rapid candidacies of Ukraine and Moldova, where significant issues like corruption and the rule of law remain unresolved. For the Western Balkans, these inconsistencies deepen frustration over the EU’s reluctance to move forward with their accession talks.

Amid these frustrations, the rise of far-right and conservative nationalist movements across North Macedonia is no exception. In the recent presidential elections, Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova (VMRO-DPMNE) won by a landslide. She is the first female president of the country and has promised to advocate for women’s positions in the country. Her party, VMRO-DPMNE¹, has expressed disdain for agreements like the ‘Treaty of Friendship, Good-Neighbourliness and Cooperation’ with Bulgaria (2017) and the Prespa Agreement with Greece (2018). These agreements, while vital for EU accession, have faced growing opposition within North Macedonia, particularly regarding the country’s name change and the treatment of its Bulgarian ethnic minority. The contentious nature of these treaties illustrates the complex

[1]Conservative and nationalist party which today is anti-EU, anti-NATO, and pro-Russian.



Road North Macedonia must navigate. Corruption, strengthening the rule of law, and economic reforms remain central to its EU aspirations, yet these diplomatic disputes with Greece and Bulgaria have become primary obstacles. The Prespa agreement changed the country's name from 'the Republic of Macedonia' to North Macedonia as Greece had been blocking the start of accession talks based on contention in the name use. Large parts of northern Greece, parts of Bulgaria as well as the whole of North Macedonia lie on the geographical area of Macedonia. Thus, Greece has been vetoing based on historical and cultural factors before the name change in the constitution of North Macedonia. In her inauguration

speech, Siljanovska-Davkova refused to use the constitutional name of North Macedonia which angered the Greeks yet again. In addition, the 'Good-Neighbourliness' treaty with Bulgaria has been adrift. Bulgaria requires North Macedonia to address its Bulgarian ethnic minority in its constitution and this was prepared by the previous government headed by the Social Democrats. However, with the current government, the amendment to the constitution is looking impossible to implement. Consequently, North Macedonia has no chance to join the European Union if two existing member states continue to block the accession talks.


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Economically, North Macedonia has made some notable progress according to the latest EU report regarding the country's suitability to join the union. The country is at a good level of preparation in terms of the functioning of the market economy and has had moderate success preparing its economy to withstand competitiveness and market forces in the EU. This follows previous reports for being positive in the economic realm whilst the latest report was negative towards progress in fighting corruption, strengthening the rule of law, and independence of courts. Like many other Western Balkan countries, North Macedonia also suffers from 'brain drain' and the mismatch between needs and skills in the developing labour

market. This hinders the economic potential of the country. Economic development is being fostered by the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) made with the EU in the early 2000s and this for instance lets some North Macedonian products enter the Union duty free. It further supports the adoption of the ‘acquis’ and aids with policy harmonisation.

Compounding these internal and external challenges is North Macedonia’s strategic location, which makes it a focal point for foreign influence. The Western Balkans as a whole are pulled in multiple directions—toward the EU, Russia, China, and Türkiye. While the North Macedonian ruling party maintains a friendly stance towards Russia, the nation as a whole opposes Russian aggression. Meanwhile, Türkiye has sought to strengthen ties with North Macedonia, recently proposing a strategic council for cooperation and aiming to double bilateral trade. China’s interest, tied to its Belt

and Road Initiative, also underscores the region’s importance in global geopolitics, particularly given North Macedonia’s proximity to Chinese-controlled infrastructure in Greece. These foreign influences further complicate North Macedonia’s EU aspirations, making it a battleground for competing interests.

This year marks the 20th anniversary of North Macedonia’s EU membership application, yet the path forward remains unclear. While the country has taken concrete steps toward accession, the constant rejection and competing foreign interests have left many in North Macedonia disillusioned. As the EU continues to dangle the promise of membership, the growing influence of external powers and the internal struggles within the country suggest that the battle for the Western Balkans is far from over. 

About Jenni Kirkinen



Jenni is a young professional with experience from EU foreign, security, and defence policy. She is currently completing an internship with the Finnish Defence Forces. Additionally, she is completing her Master’s degree in Russian, Eurasian, and Eastern European studies while graduating from European and Nordic Studies at the end of November. Previously she completed her Bachelor’s degree in International Studies from Leiden University. Jenni is interested in Russian security policy, all things EU, and a good iced latte.

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