




Weekly Briefing

**North Macedonia social briefing:
Public Opinion and Popular Narratives Ahead of the EU Council in
Fall 2019
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Introduction

The citizens of the Republic of North Macedonia (hereinafter Macedonia) are some of the most ardent supporters of the European Union (EU) in the Balkans and beyond, and staunch believers that soon their country will become part of it. In recent years, the EU enthusiasm among the population was matched by an enthusiasm and commitment by the Government. Since SDSM took over the Government from VMRO-DPMNE in 2017 (the consensus being that under the latter, Macedonia's EU bid had a backslide), Macedonia has restored its pro-EU trajectory. In turn, this has further ignited the hopes of the Macedonian public about the prospects of joining the Union in the foreseeable future. And for the time being, the opening of the EU accession talks has become the central issue in the public debates – and the popular imagination – when it comes to the EU accession, and in general, the future trajectory of the country. The opening of the accession talks has been framed as a prelude to the full membership in the EU in the years to come, although there has been general awareness that the negotiation process itself may last for many years. In the process of the continuous building up of the hopes for opening the negotiation talks, Macedonian citizens have maintained high hopes and disregarded negative decision – or rather the postponement of the decision by the EU Council in Summer 2019 – and reoriented their attention to the EU Council in Fall 2019. The ruling political elites had an important contribution to the perpetuation of optimistic and idealistic thinking as well. The reassuring messages from officials from the outgoing European Commission (EC) and from the governments of various EU member states have additionally fueled the popular enthusiasm and added to the excitement ahead of the EU Council. Thus, even weeks ahead of what may turn out to be a crucial event for Macedonia's political trajectory, the excitement has put public life in the country on hold, with the forthcoming EU Council being the most dominant topic in public debates. To provide a better understanding of how hyped the Macedonian public has become ahead of the EU Council, the paper first provides a context of the public opinion of Macedonian citizens regarding the EU and their country's accession process, and then discusses the narratives that took shape in the public discussion in the period leading up to the Council.

Public Opinion

Public opinion polls in the country have consistently showed very high levels of support of the country's potential EU accession that spans across various ethnic and religious groups, political parties, and generational cohorts. That makes the EU accession one of the few issues that are a subject of a broad national consensus. The relatively high support for the EU has endured throughout all sorts of crises, and even though at times weakening for a few percentile points, it has not waned even in the face of major shake-ups in the Union (such as the global financial crisis or Brexit), nor at the times when the EU accession bid contradicted national identity issues (such as the change of the name of the country in exchange for unlocking the accession to NATO and EU). Latest public opinion polls (published in Spring 2019) show that if there were a referendum on EU membership in the country, about 69% of Macedonians would vote in favor of Macedonia joining the Union (and 7% would vote against). This means that the ratio of EU enthusiasts to EU skeptics in the country is roughly 10:1.

While political leaders tend to emphasize the role of values when they speak about EU accession, and the benefits from being an EU member states in terms of advancing liberal democracy and the free market economy, for Macedonian citizens the main motivating factor behind their enthusiastic attitude towards the EU is the promise of immediate and substantial material gain that would translate into tangibly higher standard of living. This explicitly materialistic grounding of Macedonia's (imagined) European future has led to a popular translation of what the EU means into simple quantifiable economic terms (e.g. EU, according to the Macedonian citizens, means higher salary, higher social support, higher profits, new apartments, new cars, ability to buy all sorts of goods, enjoy all sorts of services, etc). The public opinion, at the same time, disregards any potential costs or externalities that may arise from EU membership, in particular in the domain of the economy (e.g. the further privatization of some of the public goods, the inability of Macedonian businesses to compete on the EU market, the rise of costs of living, and other risks that may emerge with the further integration into the common market).

While no polls are being published ahead of the EU Council to take place in October 2019, the consensus among media and experts is that the expectations of the Macedonian public about opening of the accession talks are at a historic high. While in the grander scheme of things the EU accession has been overwhelmingly portrayed as a zero-sum constellation, in the public debate in Fall 2019, the impending decision of the EU Council is framed as a zero-sum issue as well (e.g. opening accession talks means winning it all, not joining means losing it all). For many of the citizens, the decision of the EU Council is likely going to affect their view of the

efficiency of the work of the government – should Macedonia start the accession talks, the support for Zaev will be increased; should there be another negative decision, this will likely lead to decrease of the popular trust in the government.

Popular Narratives

Much of the narratives that dominated the public discourse ahead of the EU Council 2019 are framing the impending decision of the EU Council whether to open accession talks with Macedonia as a decisive point on the future of the EU, as well as a decisive point on the political trajectory of the country itself. Admittedly, this type of narration is not new, as Macedonia has been in a similar situation quite a few times before – be it in 2009, when the European Commission for the first time issued an official recommendation for the country to open negotiations (only to be followed by a delay in the EU Council primarily due to the unsolved name issue with Greece); or in recent years, when in Summer 2017 and Summer 2018 instead of granting an opening of the accession talks, the EU Council only issued positive assessments on the reform achievements of Macedonia, with a commitment to open the accession talks in the near future. Nevertheless, given that the EU Council in October 2019 will be the last one held during the term of the outgoing Commission, and the uncertain prospects for the EU enlargement agenda in the period to follow, the impending decision on opening the accession talks for Macedonia has been framed with as a watershed moment, and in that sense, as a far more decisive one than all previous instances.

In addition to the general developments in the EU, the domestic context adds to the impatience. The adoption and implementation of the Prespa Agreement (i.e. the change of the constitutional name of the country) is a major reason why the popular narratives frame the impending decision of the EU council as a matter of life or death for the country's EU accession prospects – as well as for Macedonia's own political trajectory. The name dispute with Greece was for a long time seen as the major (if not single) obstacle for starting the accession talks, and its solution was framed as the key step towards reaching the important milestone. This idea was perpetuated during the nation-wide referendum on the Prespa Agreement in September 2018. While the referendum ended up without a valid outcome (as there was insufficient voters' turnout, see earlier papers), what had motivated the 36.9 % of the voters who turned out, and voted overwhelmingly in favor of the Agreement was the promise of a European future. Many of the people were not in favor of changing the name of the country and many of them saw the costs that would come with such a change, but nevertheless they supported a rather difficult and

unpopular decision precisely because of the promise of the EU accession on the medium term and the expectation of immediate opening of accession talks should Macedonia change its name. Therefore, for large parts of the Macedonian society, the forthcoming decision of the EU Council is seen as a source of validation of the difficult and costly decision to change the name of the country (should it be positive) or a national humiliation that can potentially precipitate new political crisis (should it be negative). The delays in Summer 2019 only add to the uncertainty, increasing the impact and consequences of the decision.

One source that deepens the uncertainty for the Macedonian public is the coupling of the decision on Macedonia with the one on Albania. In the EU enlargement policy discourse and practice, Macedonia's bid for accession has been informally “coupled” with the one of Albania. This means that EU officials are now considering Macedonia and Albania as an “enlargement package” - implying that their performance is jointly assessed, and any decision to be made on the Balkan enlargement will concern both countries equally. The coupling of Macedonia and Albania has had a mixed reception among the Macedonian public, since their perception is that in recent years, Macedonia has had a higher achieving record than Albania. In that sense, many Macedonian citizens consider the coupling with Albania to be at their country's detriment – as they fear that due to Albania's shortcomings in terms of the necessary reforms, both countries may suffer consequences. On the other hand, a number of ethnic Albanians have considered the coupling of Macedonia's and Albania's accession bids as a fair and just move, in line with their political attitudes and ethnic sentiments. For many ethnic Albanians, the EU enlargement process is a way to achieve political union with other ethnic Albanians in the region. In that sense, for them, what matters is that both Macedonia and Albania, and in the foreseeable future Kosovo, join the EU in a coordinated manner.

The major source of insecurity ahead of the EU Council, however, has been the rising anti-enlargement attitude of some EU member states, in the first place France, the Netherlands and Denmark, which was the major cause for the previous postponements of the opening of the accession talks. The Macedonian public has little sensitivity for the national political debates within EU member states, and tends to interpret the anti-enlargement attitudes as a vulgar displays of power and prejudice – especially at times when the EC as well as the majority of EU member states are in favor of opening the accession talks. Therefore, the anti-enlargement attitudes, especially if translated in a negative decision at the EU Council, can potentially have a “heart breaking” effect and are perhaps the major threat to the EU enthusiasm in the country.

EU skeptics are at the margins of the Macedonian society and have little say in the public debates. However, they have been criticizing the attitudes of Macedonia's government all along

the process of enlargement, and have been particularly critical of the change of the country's name. Nevertheless, as they have no significant political representation, their potential to impact on the future trajectory of the country remains low – even if Macedonia's EU accession encounters a roadblock.