



## Time to Open the Waiting Room's Door?

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**SKOPJE, Macedonia | With just hours to go before the European Commission reports on Macedonia's readiness to become a candidate for EU membership, the government in Skopje is striking an upbeat note.**

If EU Enlargement Commissioner Olli Rehn on 9 November delivers the assessment – or avis – that Skopje expects, it will be up to the Council of Ministers, the EU's highest body, to decide whether to give Macedonia official status as a candidate country.

It is now over a year and a half since Macedonia officially applied for EU membership, in March 2004. Since then, it has been quizzed by the EU to assess how far the country has progressed to meet the so-called Copenhagen Criteria, a set of principles on democracy, the rule of law, human and minority rights and economic environment that Brussels require all EU hopefuls to meet. Skopje submitted its answers to a European Commission (EC) questionnaire with over 3000 entries this February and in September answered additional questions sent by the EC.

### The Lobbying Offensive

"I am certain that the avis will give an objective view of our achievements," President Branko Crvenkovski declared on 3 November.

But to make the certainty certain and present Macedonia's view of objectivity, the government has been on a diplomatic offensive since mid-October. In the weeks since then, Prime Minister Vlado Buckovski and Foreign Minister Ilinka Mitreva have visited Paris, Brussels, and London to present what they say is Macedonia's "success story."

The Macedonian foreign ministry has in the meantime sent a letter to the governments of the EU member-states, outlining nine reasons why Macedonia expects a positive avis. Along with ongoing reforms and cross-party support for accession, Macedonian officials highlight the peaceful resolution of the 2001 armed conflict between government forces and ethnic-Albanian rebels. The 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement that ended the conflict granted Macedonia's ethnic minorities more substantial rights and has kept the country on a path to political stability.

Aware that Washington lobbied in support of Turkey's bid for EU membership, Prime Minister Buckovski also visited the United States in an effort to drum up additional support.

He received acknowledgement of Macedonia's efforts. After a short meeting with Buckovski on 27 October, U.S. President George Bush said that "Macedonia made progress in the reforms necessary for membership in

NATO and the EU." Back home, Buckovski rather more enthusiastically claimed that he had won Washington's "complete support and lobbying among its allies in Europe."

The vibes from Brussels itself have been muted, with EC officials stressing the reforms that Macedonia has yet to undertake.

At a 12 October meeting in Brussels with Buckovski, the EU's foreign and security policy chief, Javier Solana, stressed that the judicial reforms are of utmost importance.

Solana's message was echoed by Enlargement Commissioner Rehn, who emphasized judicial reform and also the need to improve the civil service. Rehn stressed that "the avis is neither the beginning nor the end of the reform process" and that "the quality of reforms will determine the integration tempo."

Whether the tempo of integration will be so slow that Macedonia might miss the chance to join the EU is not a fear that officials in Skopje are prepared to air. In October, Solana told Deputy Prime Minister Radmila Sekerinska, who oversees Macedonia's EU integration efforts, that "there is no huge enthusiasm for enlargement in the EU" and that the EU would now concentrate more on its internal structure and affairs.

However, Solana also made it clear that the EU would "fulfill its obligations" toward the Balkans.

### A Signal To The Region?

Some experts on the Balkans have been more upbeat on Macedonia's bid that EC officials.

In a recent debate on Radio France International, Jacques Rupnik, a leading French expert on the Balkans, praised Macedonia as an "example of a European success," though one, Rupnik added, that "not many people know about." He stressed the peaceful resolution of Macedonia's armed conflict and the crucial role the EU played in securing the peace. Rupnik believes that a positive avis for Macedonia would send a good signal to other states in the region.

The European Stability Initiative, a Berlin-based think-tank, shares that view.

"The EU should send a signal through Macedonia in December that the rest of the region will not be forgotten in the process of Europeanization," Gerald Knaus, the ESI director told the Macedonian section of the BBC. "The opposite outcome would be a very dangerous message, coming before a solution to Kosovo's status has been found."

EU accession is an issue that unites Macedonians across both party and ethnic divides.

A recent poll by Skopje's Institute for Socio-Political and Legal Research showed that more than 80 percent of the population would like to see Macedonia in the European Union and 55 percent believe that the country has already fulfilled the EU's membership conditions.

Polls also suggest that 40 percent of Macedonia's citizens specifically support the current government's EU policies.

In the opposition camp, most criticism is directed at the quality of the government's policies.

"The government insists that we are moving in the right direction, but forgets that the speed at which we are moving forward is also important," the leader of the opposition, Nikola Gruevski, told TOL.

Gruevski highlights what he says is the government's failure to cooperate with the opposition on EU issues. In response, the opposition recently organized a conference titled "What Comes After 9 November?" at which a number of experts argued that the battle for Macedonia's future has to be won at home.

"Brussels's opinion might send a positive signal but it cannot employ people, it cannot solve judicial problems, and it cannot make the administration more efficient," Gruevski argues.

### **Judicial Reform: Top Priority**

When 20 members of Macedonia's EU integration team visited Brussels in late October to provide final clarifications before the avis was prepared, judicial reform was discussed at length.

The independence of judicial appointments was a topic of particular debate. To date, the Macedonian parliament has appointed judges and prosecutors directly. That should change when new legislation is passed, though the two-thirds majority needed may be hard to muster. Under the new law, appointments would be decided by a nine-member council, at least three of whose members would come from ethnic minorities. The council would be chaired by the president of the Supreme Court. Two members would be appointed by the president, and three by parliament. A point of concern for the EC is the involvement of the justice minister in the council.

Other law-and-order issues relate to police reform and corruption. The EC sought assurances that police will not use disproportionate force, highlighting eight recent cases of concern. It also placed special emphasis on anti-corruption measures and a number of specific corruptions cases, calling for institutionalized cooperation between the Anti-Corruption Commission and the public prosecutor.

In addition, Macedonia's electoral system is shaping up to be a critical issue. In its 15 years of independence,

Macedonia has hardly had an election without irregularities, incidents, and a boycott by at least one major political party.

Parliament should soon address EC concerns, by voting on whether to a range of technical improvements and removing judges from election commissions. However, the EC will also be looking for politicians to change. EC officials told deputy prime ministers, Radmila Sekerinska and Musa Xhaferi, that there would be zero tolerance for any future electoral irregularities and that next year's parliamentary elections will represent the ultimate test of Macedonia's maturity as a democracy.

Jovan Donev, head of the Euro-Balkan Institute in Skopje, told TOL that he believes Macedonia will be given a specific date for the start of membership negotiations only after those elections, which are scheduled for September 2006.

In a recent column in the Washington Times, Prime Minister Buckovski explicitly promised well-run, free and fair parliamentary elections next year.

### **Economy: A Painful Issue**

Buckovski also highlighted economic reforms, and it is the economy that most concerns ordinary Macedonians. In recent research conducted by the UNDP and the pollsters Brima Gallup, Macedonians highlighted unemployment, poverty, and corruption are the key issues for them. The research revealed that over 40 percent of the population has no regular income. The unemployment rate is 26 percent.

Further evidence of the economy's weakness came in late October when the World Bank highlighted Macedonia's low rate of growth, saying that the economy is expanding at just three percent, a very figure compared with figures from elsewhere in the region. The bank fingered the inefficient judicial system, corruption, high interest rates, over-regulation, and political risk as the biggest obstacles to the development of the private sector.

The World Bank on 27 October provided \$30 million in funding earmarked for structural and institutional reforms, as well as improvements in the investment climate and public-sector management.

Macedonian officials themselves are optimistic about foreign direct investment (FDI). On his return from the United States, Buckovski declared that he expected \$500 million in U.S. investment in 2006. On another occasion, his deputy Radmila Sekerinska said she expected \$120 million in FDI by the end of 2005.

Addressing potential German investors, Sekerinska highlighted a rapid rise in exports and promised new economic reforms and a reduction in red tape.

Whether more money comes into the country may depend heavily on a positive avis from the EC. That would enhance Macedonia's image with foreign investors and also give it access to the EU's pre-accession funds.

### **In Want Of A Friendly Neighbor**

Macedonian officials do not seem acutely worried about the many concerns aired by the European Commission. They say the experience shows that at this stage applicants usually get more minuses than pluses.

Jovan Despotovski, an adviser in the government's Sector for European Integration, believes implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement is Macedonia's major trump-card. He does not consider the weak economy to be a potentially decisive element in the EC's thinking, he told TOL, since Macedonia is a small country whose economy is insignificant in size.

Despite the government's sanguine approach, some analysts argue that Macedonia needs a good patron within the EU who would lobby for the country's membership in the way that Austria is often perceived as have lobbied on Croatia's behalf.

Others seem more concerned with the possibility that Greece might veto a decision by the Council of Ministers to recognize Macedonia as a candidate country. Since Macedonia's independence, Greece objected to Macedonians using the name Macedonia, regarding the name as a part of its cultural heritage. In 1995, Greece and Macedonia normalized relations and pledged to find a solution to the name issue, but UN-brokered talks between Athens and Skopje have yet to produce a solution.

EU officials have said that Brussels regards the name issue as a bilateral matter and will not interfere.