

North Macedonia to hold snap elections in April 2020 as the EU fails to agree to start accession negotiation

Blerim Vela, Doctoral Researcher on Contemporary European Studies, Sussex European Institute, University of Sussex

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The Council of the European Union meeting at the end of last week, failed, for the second time, to agree on opening the accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia despite the recommendation from the European Commission and the European Parliament. The heads of the EU member states promised in June 2019 to take [“a clear and substantive decision as soon as possible and no later than October 2019”](#). The lack of consensus was primarily due to France’s objection, while Denmark and the Netherlands only objected to opening negotiations with Albania and sought to disentangle the joint decision to start the accession negotiation for North Macedonia.

French President Emanuel Macron announced that he [wanted to reform the EU’s enlargement process as the current process was not credible](#). This stance echoed the 2018 European Commission’s Enlargement Strategy that stated “the Union must be stronger and more solid, before it can be bigger”. Nevertheless, after the meeting, [German Chancellor Angela Merkel expressed her disappointment, but noted that the matter would be revisited before a summit on the Western Balkans early next year](#). Similar disappointment was expressed by Jean-Claude Juncker, the president of the European Commission, who called it a [major historic mistake and that the EU had to keep its promises towards candidate countries](#).

Back in North Macedonia, there is a sense that many politicians and member of the general public feel betrayed by the EU member states and the EU institutions despite the fact that the country took some difficult decisions in the past two years. This included the decision to change its name and sign a friendship treaty in order to remove the last bilateral obstacles from Greece and Bulgaria that stalled its EU accession path since the country was granted the candidate status in 2005. In the long term, the lack of EU accession process credibility will put into question all the EU’s investment in the North Macedonia and it could result in the slowdown of reforms in the country.

Questioning the EU’s accession commitment and assessment approach

The prolonged EU accession of the Western Balkans countries has raised many questions in these countries as well as the EU member states. The main issue addressed by North Macedonia leaders is whether the EU member states are still committed to Western Balkans countries joining the EU. In response to the Council’s failure to agree on opening the accession negotiations, [North Macedonia’s foreign minister, Nikola Dimitrov, asked that the EU was straightforward with region’s countries by expressing clearly whether they had an EU membership perspective](#). The hesitation or ambiguity from the EU member states and the EU institutions to proceed with enlargement could be exploited domestically by anti-EU political forces that prefer closer ties with other countries such as Russia and Turkey and other international actors seeking to expand their influence in the region.

Besides addressing the bilateral accession conditionality, North Macedonia had to provide proof of reforms in economic policy, human rights, anti-corruption measures and the rule of law. Reforms to the judiciary have proven to be the most difficult for all countries of the Western Balkans with persistent weaknesses in terms of judiciary’s effectiveness and influence from political parties. The European Commission, which regularly monitors the progress of candidate countries, has updated its

approach to assessing the reforms in judiciary and other the rule of law institutions through introduction of benchmarks and “fundamentals first” principle. [The European Commission said in May 2019 that North Macedonia had made sufficient progress](#) in its accession reforms. However, France’s veto to opening the EU accession negotiations brought to the surface its disagreement over the way in which EU institutions structure the accession process and measure the countries’ progress in achieving the accession requirements.

A potential way forward that would reconcile the will of majority of the EU member states to proceed with enlargement and meet the aspirations of the Western Balkans countries for EU membership is to address the constant obstacles and conditionality from EU member states towards Balkan countries. This could be achieved by removing the unanimity rule that requires the support of all EU member states for Western Balkan countries to progress in different stages of the EU accession process.

What next for North Macedonia?

Following the failure to start the accession negotiations, the [Prime Minister of North Macedonia Zoran Zaev announced the intention to hold snap parliamentary elections](#). Soon after, the President of the country Stevo Pendarovski held a meeting of the leaders of the main political parties in order to anchor the support for the EU accession process despite the setback and agree on the date for early elections. Leaders of the political parties agreed to [hold early parliamentary elections on April 12, 2020, and to form a technical caretaking government in 100 days leading to election day](#). The timing of the early elections is less than ideal for the main governing party, the centre left Social Democratic Union (SDSM) and other governing parties as it spent much of its political capital in reaching agreements with neighbouring countries, Greece and Bulgaria, on sensitive issues and less on domestic issues.

[Over the summer, the country was rocked by the high-profile extortion scandal involving the former chief special prosecutor Katica Janeva tasked with investigating high-level corruption and two other businessmen who were acting as mediators](#). The Special Prosecution was established in 2015 to fight corruption and organized crime as part of North Macedonia’s bid to join the EU. The extortion case revealed [enormous bribery and rewards from a businessman Orce Kamcev in order to ease his legal plight](#). One of the suspects includes [the vice-president of parliament and a senior politician in Prime Minister Zoran Zaev’s ruling Social Democratic party, Frosina Remenski](#).

In response to the extortion case, the main opposition party, the centre right Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (VMRO DPMNE), has called on the Prime Minister to resign and hold snap elections. However, VMRO DPMNE’s reputation is still questioned due to corruption and state capture that marked its reign of power from 2006 until 2017. The party also opposed the agreements reached with Greece and Bulgaria and called for their revision and ultimately their revocation. The majority of Albanian voters in North Macedonia view VMRO DPMNE with suspicion due to its nationalistic rhetoric that targeted their linguistic and political rights. If VMRO DPMNE wins the April 2020 elections, the country will enter a new phase of political uncertainty regarding the internal democratic reforms and its international alignment.

The April 2020 elections are expected to provide some clarity whether the public is still backing political parties that promote the EU accession process. Currently, all political actors remain committed to link the domestic reform agenda with the incentives provided by the EU accession process rather than trying to align the country with other regional actors such as Russia, Turkey and China. In the short term, North Macedonia’s imminent accession into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) will provide some comfort to public and politicians in terms of its security and stability from external pressures as the country decides on its future political direction.