

Neighbours with Benefits? North Macedonia & Greece after the Prespa Agreement

Roundtable Discussion Report
FES EU Office Brussels – 6 March 2019

Within the scope of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's Balkan Series, the FES EU Office hosted a roundtable discussion on the recent Prespa Agreement between Athens and Skopje, which settled the long-lasting name dispute between Greece and the now renamed Republic of North Macedonia. The event built upon last year's Dialogue Programme for Good Neighbourly Relations between Athens and Skopje, which was co-organised by FES, [Eliamep](#) and [Eurothink](#) and brought together representatives from academia, civil society, foreign policy editors and local municipal representatives. The FES had invited various stakeholders to Brussels to discuss not only what lies ahead for the new Republic of North Macedonia but also what lessons can be learned from the bilateral agreement.

The hard work has just begun

In the first part of the two-session roundtable discussion, it became evident that despite the landmark agreement between Athens and Skopje, one shouldn't lean back since the hard work is just about to begin. Ljupcho Petkovski, Executive Director at Eurothink in Skopje, pointed towards the fragile political cli-

mate in North Macedonia, not least because of administrative capacity issues and corruption charges. With particular regard to the anti-corruption committee and the upcoming impunity law, it would be crucial that justice is seen to be done. Put differently, the Republic of North Macedonia must demonstrate its capacity to reinforce justice and the rule of law.



Ioannis Armakolas, Ulrich Storck, Ljupcho Petkovski, Eva Ellereit and Tonino Picula

Furthermore, Petkovski stressed the need to recognise the substantial trench in public opinion in both countries towards the Prespa agreement. While many Greeks demonstrated against the agreement, demanding their government to focus on domestic issues in addition to historical territorial claims, many in North

Macedonia expect the young country to join the EU in the next five to six years according to opinion polls. Both dynamics present serious challenges to durable reforms and reconciliation between Athens and Skopje.

To foster sustainable rapprochement between the two countries, professor Ioannis Armakolas from the University of Macedonia in Thessaloniki and analyst at Eliamep, argues that it would be critical to avoid a sentimental backlash in both societies, which can only be done by introducing lasting reforms that secure economic sustainability and address internal challenges such as air pollution, road construction or waste disposal in North Macedonia simultaneously. In the current time of consistent misinformation, the government would have to communicate the many concrete benefits for the people effectively in order to gain public support for the agreement.

EU must further support enlargement

Besides the internal dimension, however, North Macedonia's hope for EU membership depends on the EU and indeed its member states' willingness to prepare for enlargement. Tonino Picula, MEP and S&D Rapporteur for North Macedonia, noted the prevailing reluctance towards enlargement of several member states, among them France, the Netherlands and Denmark. He emphasised the responsibility of the EU member states, but also his

colleagues in the European Parliament, to seize the historic opportunity of the Prespa Agreement to re-create new alliances and to advance partnerships as in the case of past EU enlargement. Following up on this point, Georgi Pirinski MEP entertained the possibility of a trilateral effort for the micro region that would include Bulgaria. In reference to the ongoing Berlin Process, he argued that a champion would be needed in order to streamline a process that would include Bulgaria and Greece in order to offer a credible EU perspective to North Macedonia.

In June 2019, the EU member states are set to take a decision on North Macedonia's readiness to open accession negotiations with the EU. Several speakers raised the issue of de-coupling, which refers to the question of whether the Commission and its member states will assess North Macedonia separately or link it to Albania's EU accession negotiations. The upcoming months will prove whether North Macedonia can enact progressive policies and stay on a pro-EU path or if the EU's momentum for enlargement has lost its dynamic.

Overall, the roundtable discussion, which was chaired by Eva Ellereit, director of the FES office in North Macedonia, and Ulrich Storck, director of the FES office in Greece, sparked great interest and attracted more than 40 participants.