



## Euro-Atlantic Integration of North Macedonia

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*On 12 February, Macedonia changed its name to North Macedonia. This is the result of the Prespa Agreement, concluded in June 2018 with Greece, which in return unblocked Macedonian accession talks with NATO and the EU. Macedonia has already signed the protocol to join the North Atlantic Alliance and Greece was the first to ratify it. It is expected that in the course of one year, North Macedonia will join NATO, and in June will start accession negotiations with the EU. Acceleration of the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans is an important goal of Poland, so it is worth considering rapid ratification of the protocol.*

**Change of the Name of the Country.** The announcement by Prime Minister Zoran Zaev to international partners about the state's change of name was the culmination of the process associated with Euro-Atlantic integration. The Republic of North Macedonia has replaced the constitutional name of the Republic of Macedonia, used in most bilateral relations, and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), applied, for example, in multilateral international relations. The change is directly related to the Greek parliament's vote on 8 February to ratify, by an absolute majority of 153 out of 300 votes, the protocol on the accession of Macedonia to NATO, which had been signed two days earlier in Brussels. The Greek government agreed to the protocol after ratification of the Prespa Agreement by the parliament in Athens at the end of January. This ratification was possible, in turn, after the adoption on 11 January in the parliament of Macedonia—by a qualified majority of 81 out of 120 votes—of amendments to the constitution, including changing the official name of the state, with their entry into force contingent on Greece's approval of the protocol on the accession of Macedonia to NATO.

Such a conditional, sequential approach was a guarantee for Greece that Macedonia would change its name and for the latter country, that this step would keep Greece from further blocking the NATO accession. The risk of circumstances that might have prevented the performance of the obligations stemmed from, among others, [the referendum in Macedonia in September 2018](#). There was also a fear the Greek parliament might block the agreement because the deal was questioned by some in the main ruling party, Syriza, as well as part of the coalition and the opposition. This, in turn, would have meant the dissolution of the government of Alexis Tsipras and the added risk that a coalition opposed to the agreement would have taken power. The departure of the Greek foreign minister, Nikolas Kotzias, a Syriza member, in October 2018, and of the defence minister, Panagiotis Kammenos, in January 2019—which also resulted in his Independent Greeks party leaving the coalition—were ultimately not enough to block the agreement.

**Accession to NATO.** Approval of the agreement in both parliaments led to the commencement of the procedure of admitting Macedonia to the Alliance. The protocol was signed after short accession talks, which started in October 2018. NATO invited Macedonia to membership in July 2018—more than a decade after Greece opposed it at the Bucharest summit. After the enlargement to Albania and Croatia in 2009 and to Montenegro in 2017, North Macedonia will be the fourth NATO country in the Western Balkans. Three others remain outside.

North Macedonia has little fighting potential. Expenditure on defence in 2017 amounted to about 1% of GDP. In 2018, it had an army of about 8,000 and almost 5,000 reserve soldiers. The army is equipped mainly with Soviet gear from the 1970s and '80s, and to a lesser extent some American and Greek equipment from the same period. Therefore, the contribution to increasing the Alliance's defence capabilities is insignificant.

Despite limited military capabilities, the country is involved in international stabilisation initiatives. It participates in OSCE missions in Ukraine, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), and Kosovo, as well as in the EU military operation in BiH. It also has participated in NATO's ISAF mission in Afghanistan.

**Accession Negotiations with the EU.** Talks on Macedonian membership in the EU were also unblocked thanks to the agreement. However, less than two weeks after the deal was signed, the Council of the European Union postponed for one year the decision to open negotiations—till June 2019. Their immediate start was prevented by France, which cited insufficient strengthening of the rule of law. However, the reason behind it could be that France has the EU's lowest public support for enlargement (30%), after Finland, which turned out to be important to the French authorities in light of the upcoming elections to the European Parliament. In September, Macedonia started the "screening process," which aims to indicate the level of national law alignment with EU legislation. The country became an official candidate for EU membership in 2005.

The Council of the EU will decide whether to open negotiations, based on progress in three areas: judicial reforms, prosecution and conviction in corruption and organised crime cases; intelligence and security services reforms; and administrative reforms. These will be assessed through the prism of implementing "urgent reform priorities," established in 2015 as part of a cross-party consensus following [the disclosure of, among other things, systemic corruption and the dependence of the judicial system on the government of Nikolai Gruevski](#). Meanwhile, Gruevski, the former prime minister, sentenced in 2018 to two years in prison for abuse of office and authority of a corrupt character, [escaped with the help of the Hungarian government to Budapest, where he obtained asylum](#).

**Conclusions and Perspectives.** The change of the country's name was a long-term process because it concerned issues related to national identity. Therefore, it was a dispute with not only a rationale but also an emotional basis. This is evidenced by, among other things, acceptance of the agreement by a number of votes only slightly exceeding the required majority, as well as the resignations of key Greek ministers. After future changes of governments, a rapid return to the name issue is unlikely in North Macedonia because it would mean another blocking of its European integration, a process that in 2018 was supported by 83% of the population. In Greece, however, the temptations to renegotiate the accord cannot be ruled out (e.g., regarding the name of the Macedonian language or trademarks). As the dispute showed, it probably would not involve political losses, and until the accession of North Macedonia to the EU—a long-term perspective—Greece will have a political advantage over the state as it negotiates its membership.

This risk exists because the linking of the change of the country's name to the Euro-Atlantic integration of Macedonia—despite bilateral safeguards—did not take into account international guarantees for implementation of the agreement. Neither NATO nor the EU was a party to the accord, and a favourable political constellation in both countries determined that the dispute was over. However, the involvement of important international actors favoured implementation of the agreement. This was evidenced by visits by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, among others, to Skopje just before the Macedonian referendum, as well as a visit by the latter to Athens before the key votes.

Meanwhile, the change of the name of the state in practice determines the accession of North Macedonia to NATO—an issue of existential significance in the long term for this multi-ethnic state. This will happen once the protocol is ratified by all Member States and its own parliament. In the case of Montenegro, this process took a year but North Macedonia will probably be trying to speed it up so that formal admission is possible during the NATO summit planned for December in London. Poland may consider swift ratification because it would emphasise its attachment to the Alliance's open-door policy, which from the Polish perspective is important beyond the Balkans. Although North Macedonia's membership will not significantly increase NATO's potential, it will have a stabilising effect on this country and the entire region. Most of the countries in the area will be in the Alliance, which will be a fundamental change of the security environment and a further limitation of the ambitions of Russia—a country that [since 2015 has been attempting to hinder rapprochement between Macedonia and NATO](#).

The opening of the accession talks for both North Macedonia and Albania with the EU will depend mainly on France. Its consent after the elections to the EP will probably determine the start of negotiations. [Changes in Hungary's policy towards the Western Balkans](#) mean that for the first time a Visegrad Group member is conducting policy unpredictably regarding EU enlargement. At the same time, one should expect the mobilisation of EU institutions for the opening of talks, as this would constitute visible progress in European integration before the end of the current term. It is also in the interest of Poland, which, through regular ministerial consultations within the Skopje Conference for almost a decade, has been sharing its integration experience with Macedonia, and the negotiation progress would be evidence of the effectiveness of these activities.