

Comment: Macedonia's Decisive Year on Road to NATO and EU

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If Macedonia is duly rewarded for its efforts to join key western institutions, it will serve as a beacon for the region.

This year, Macedonia will start on the final preparations and reforms that it needs to undertake to ensure a sought-after invitation to join NATO and the golden seal of approval by Brussels of candidate status for European Union membership.

Addressing the Foreign Affairs Committee of the European Parliament, Oli Rehn, EU Enlargement Commissioner, said the European Commission expected to issue its avis on Macedonia in the coming months, so that the issue of the country's candidate status should be up before the European Council by December at the latest.

Such a timetable puts Macedonia clearly in line to join the list of countries that have obtained EU candidate status, namely Croatia and Turkey.

Macedonia will deliver its 14,000-page-long list of answers to an EC questionnaire in Brussels on February 14 - which will provide the equivalent of an X-ray of Macedonia's present circumstances, and of the reforms that it envisages.

But once the questionnaire has been returned to Brussels, the accession process is far from over. Aside from having to answer any additional questions that the commission may pose, Macedonia will have to undertake other tasks indispensable to the process of gaining EU membership.

The country needs to show it possesses both stable institutions and a sound legal system. It will have to direct much of its energy and resources towards further reforms and improving performance.

The business of answering the questionnaire amid the turmoil provoked by the resignation of the Prime Minister Hari Kostov, the election of a new government and a hotly debated referendum on the controversial issue of decentralisation, all show that Macedonia's institutions can work - and achieve results - in extraordinary circumstances.

One test of whether these institutions function will be the next round of local elections in March, when both the country's political parties and the institutions of state will have to confirm their overall democratic and progressive orientation.

The government will have to show it can organise fair and democratic elections and - to verify this - it has already invited foreign and local election monitors to take part.

The rule of law must be seen to be the sole criteria in determining who will govern the various municipalities, which will now be empowered with more competences and bigger budgets as a result of the recent decentralisation laws.

The year 2005 will also be dedicated to reforming the judiciary. This is the next target area that the country must tackle in order to ensure candidate status for both the EU and NATO.

At the same time, Macedonia has to start setting out a national development plan to map a route for the country's long term, sustainable economic development within a competitive EU market.

Another project of similar importance will be a national programme for the adoption of the *acquis*. This will have to set out the exact time frame by which Macedonia will be able to fully harmonise its economy and legislation with the *acquis communautaire* -as the rights and obligations binding all members of the EU are known.

These are all necessary measures and they ought to reflect a nationwide consensus, which will in turn ensure a successful outcome to the local elections, the smooth adoption of decentralisation and the creation of an independent, efficient judiciary.

All this will take place in a challenging regional context - and one that will take on extra significance in 2005 due to the announced start of discussions on the final status of Kosovo, which some fear may heighten regional tensions.

Macedonia is a country that has never exported instability, even during the crisis of 2001. It has always been a constructive partner to the international community. Indeed, it ought to be recalled that at the height of the crisis in neighboring Kosovo in 1998 and 1999, Macedonia took in more than 300,000 refugees.

Therefore, Macedonia's progress in EU-plus-NATO may serve as an added insurance against future regional security challenges, especially through upgraded cooperation between Macedonia and NATO.

Macedonia is accelerating and finalising its army reforms, which will enable its armed forces to operate in tandem with those of the alliance, and fulfill other standards necessary for NATO membership.

A green light from the EC, granting Macedonia the status of an EU candidate country along with access to pre-accession funds, and an invitation to join NATO, will not affect Macedonia alone. The EU and NATO will also have set out a realistic road map for the rest of the countries of the western Balkans.

This green light will stand as proof that hard work and devotion make integration with key western institutions achievable goals, even for Balkan states that have experienced ethnic conflicts.

It will show also that this goal is achievable only by abiding by the principles of democracy, tolerance and the rule of law - and this applies especially to Balkan states that have gone through the hardships of ethnic division and conflict.

The dominant feeling in the western Balkans is that EU membership is so far away that it is an imaginary goal. This depressing climate of opinion can only be changed through positive examples.

The EU has always been perceived as a master in the application of a "soft-power" policy, that is, creating stability through the implementation of the EU's own regulations. Actually, there is no better policy.

This policy has been already tested. That it has worked was proven by the EU's enlargement in 2004. The same policy is also being tested in the Balkans and the year 2007 will show it can work here. Macedonia's

success in 2005 could show that with necessary dedication on all sides, this policy should and will continue.

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