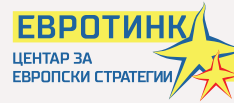


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## All of you will betray the EU tonight! Speak now or remain silent

The citizens of North Macedonia have legitimate expectations to start accession negotiations with the EU now. North Macedonia has pursued difficult reforms and made unprecedented compromises. Our country even changed its constitutional name, driven by the promise for EU membership.

Yet, at the General Affairs Council tomorrow we will likely witness a betrayal again. This will not only be a betrayal of the Macedonian citizens, but of the founding values of the EU, as well as its core strategic interests.

The Bulgarian requests in the Framework Position of October 2019, and the statements that followed are based on misinterpretation of the Treaty on Friendship, Good Neighbourly Relations and Cooperation signed between the two countries "in good will". The Bulgarian side uses the position of an EU MS to impose its own interpretation of the Treaty. It is imposing its version of history on North Macedonia and denying the Macedonian identity, including the Macedonian language thus breaching the right to self-determination. However, through the accession process Bulgaria is also seeking an endorsement of its own (mis)interpretation of a significant part of European history by other EU MS.

Furthermore, the Bulgarian position is in contradiction with and thus delegitimises the Prespa Agreement between North Macedonia and Greece, which the EU praised two years ago as an example of solving bilateral issues in the region. The Prespa Agreement clearly demonstrated the readiness of North Macedonia not only to find compromises but also honour its agreements and implement them by ending an almost three-decades long dispute within the UN.

The possible blockage of the negotiating framework and the recent statements from Bulgarian officials denying the Macedonian identity, have deeply disappointed and disillusioned the Macedonian citizens. Instead of a common European future, they are faced with ultimatums they do not have the right to accept. The citizens of North Macedonia are prepared for an accession process based on shared EU values and standards, but not one as an instrument for changing their identity.

Submissiveness to the Bulgarian requests, unfounded in the acquis and international standards, would not only betray North Macedonia. It will destroy the EU's credibility in international relations and as a partner of the Western Balkans, destabilise the EU's external borders, euthanize the enlargement process overall and destroy the conditionality policy.

## EU response to internal and external challenges is further weakened

"No" to the EU accession process of North Macedonia will have severe security consequences for the region and EU's management of external borders.

Balkan disputes will continue to linger with more possible conflict scenarios and with no incentive for politicians to agree to difficult compromises. The goals of this geopolitical Commission will be ruined if the EU fails to deliver in the Balkans. A veto in this case questions any merit-based decision-making on the side of the EU and annuls the accession prospect of the region. Yet, the outstanding bilateral disputes will remain and augment, causing grave negative consequences for the stability of the Balkans, which remains in Europe. This will seriously undermine the EU efforts to build resilience capacities of its alliances. Geography cannot be changed, but right political decisions can shape geopolitical future of the Union and the Western Balkans region. North Macedonia is a member of NATO, and now it is also time to make its accession negotiations process irreversible.

Bulgaria's policies already have serious consequences for the entire EU: in absence of FRONTEX deployment in North Macedonia, which has already been blocked by "Bulgaria's refusal to sign the agreement that includes the Macedonian language", border control will remain fragile and porous in the key country that closed the Balkan route.

## **The EU's enlargement policy towards the Western Balkans – “it's all water under the bridge now” .**

How about one member state blocking another member state because of different historical perspectives or right to self-determination? The blockade of the Macedonian accession negotiations would put an end to the enlargement policy of the Union and to its conditionality policy. The EU would actually punish the most pro-European government in the region for making compromises in the European spirit, which were encouraged by the EU itself.

By vetoing the EU accession bid of North Macedonia, Bulgaria is making the French supported accession negotiation methodology irrelevant and inefficient in its inception. It confirms fears about member states' real will to finalise Europe's unification and to achieve continental integrity with the Western Balkans. The Bulgarian request to include the bilateral issues in the negotiating framework is contrary to the principle declared in the methodology to *“abstain from misusing outstanding issues in the EU accession process”*.

The pre-dominance of the bilaterally imposed conditions, which are neither related to the *acquis*, nor to international standards, will further jeopardize the principle of predictability, positive and negative conditionality. The Bulgarian requests furthermore compromise the accession criteria from the cluster “Fundamentals” on democratic institutions and the rule of law, which strongly rely on the standards set-up by the Council of Europe, the bodies under its umbrella and other international organizations. Compliance with the membership responsibilities and established standards is an obligation and not a choice for EU acceding countries, as well as for any member of these organisations, including all EU member states.

## **Destroyed credibility of the EU in the Western Balkans - the “Look who is talking” effect**

The narrative of the EU accession process in the Western Balkans was built on EU values and standards. They have been the source of legitimacy of the governmental and non-governmental actors in the Western Balkans dedicated to fostering democratic consolidation through rule of law, respect for human rights, and economic governance. In its decision to open accession negotiations with North Macedonia, the Council did not attach any further conditions to the first accession conference. An EU “No” to the Macedonian accession process now as a result of further conditions is a make-or-break moment for the credibility of the entire process.

The EU has promoted itself as a community of values by looking forward, accepting historical differences and transforming animosities into potential for development, focusing on how its nations to better cooperate and integrate, rather than to confront each other. Article. 4 of the Treaty on the EU states *“The Union shall respect the equality of Member States before the Treaties as well as their national identities”*. If a member state blocks the overdue accession negotiations denying a candidate's identity, the Union will lose credibility in the region, but also more broadly the status of a normative actor with a common foreign and security policy on the international scene. Failing North Macedonia now demonstrates a fundamental lack of respect for EUs own values, and the basic principles of international law and universal human rights, and seriously undermines the EU's ability as an international actor.

North Macedonia has proven its commitment to European values. It is now the EU's turn to stand to its values and international norms. In its blockade of North Macedonia's accession framework, Bulgaria is misusing the inherent power imbalance of the accession process. With its interpretation of “our” common regional and the Macedonian national history, the rejection of mere existence of the historical roots of the Macedonian nation and our Macedonian language, Bulgaria dangerously diminishes the credibility of the EU vis-à-vis candidates. It is the responsibility of all other EU member states to safeguard the enlargement process, the EU's values, and its ability to make significant decisions.

***As we stand united in diversity, we expect the EU to stand by ‘United in diversity’,  
It is high time for call, do not betray the EU, take the right side of the history and  
speak up now!***