

**CONFERENCE ON ACCESSION
TO THE EUROPEAN UNION
- NORTH MACEDONIA -**

**POLITICAL MEETING OF
THE INTERGOVERNMENTAL CONFERENCE
ON THE ACCESSION OF NORTH MACEDONIA
TO THE EUROPEAN UNION**

EU COMMON POSITION

EU OPENING STATEMENT FOR ACCESSION NEGOTIATIONS

1. On behalf of the European Union, I am delighted to welcome here today the distinguished representatives of North Macedonia to start the **opening phase** of the **accession negotiations** of your country with the European Union.
2. This is a historic moment for us all, which marks a **milestone in the evolution of our relationship**. The enlargement process gives strong encouragement to political and economic reforms and reinforces peace, democracy and stability in Europe and brings people closer together.
3. The decision to open accession negotiations, on the basis of **the enhanced enlargement methodology**, endorsed by the members of the European Council in March 2020, is not only an important step in North Macedonia's relations with the EU but is also a clear demonstration of the **EU's unequivocal support to the European perspective of the Western Balkans**, expressed in the Thessaloniki Agenda, as well as in the Sofia, Zagreb and Brdo Declarations. Your country is part of European history, heritage and culture, and we look forward to further intensifying our already well-established ties.
4. Opening of the accession negotiations also further demonstrates that, when conditions are met, **the EU delivers on its commitments**. As illustrated by today's conference, the Union remains firmly committed to this process. We welcome North Macedonia's determination to advance on the EU reform agenda and expect continued political commitment to carry out necessary reforms thoroughly and vigorously.
5. North Macedonia - a candidate country since 2005 - is a close partner of the European Union as part of **the Stabilisation and Association Process**. Our Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA), the first in the region, is in force since 2004, and is the basis for our extensive cooperation in a broad range of areas. North Macedonia continues to implement its obligations under the SAA. Our political and economic dialogue has been developing, notably within the SAA bodies.
6. The **benefits for both sides of our close relations are evident**. The EU is your biggest trading partner, with obvious benefits for business and foreign investment. For your citizens, travel to the EU has become easier since visa liberalisation entered into force in 2009. The EU has been providing financial and technical support, under various financial instruments, and will continue to do so including under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance. Moreover, North Macedonia participates in a number of EU programmes, including

Erasmus+, Creative Europe, the programme for the Competitiveness of Enterprises and Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (COSME) and Europe for Citizens. North Macedonia is also an observer of the Agency for Fundamental Rights and a contracting party of the Energy Community Treaty and Transport Community Treaty.

7. The strength of our relations - our unity and solidarity - has once again been demonstrated during the **COVID-19 crisis**. The European Union stood by North Macedonia and by its Western Balkans partners. This support and cooperation went far beyond what any other partner has provided to the region with about €66 million in grant aid and €160 million in macro-financial assistance for North Macedonia¹. The European Union also recognises the valuable support the Western Balkans have given during the pandemic to their immediate neighbours and towards the EU. This reflects the solidarity and mutual support the EU is built on. **Russia's unjustified and unprovoked military aggression against Ukraine** is having a significant impact on the entire European continent. Western Balkans are expected to commit to European values as future EU Member States. The EU and the Western Balkans have already joined forces in supporting Ukraine and combating Russia's disinformation campaign. We highly welcome North Macedonia's full alignment with all EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) decisions and declarations, and encourage North Macedonia to continue to fully align with the EU CFSP.
8. The Council in its conclusions of 25 March 2020, which were endorsed by the members of the European Council on 26 March 2020, welcomed that North Macedonia has demonstrated its **determination to advance the EU reform agenda** and has delivered tangible and sustained results, fulfilling the conditions identified by the June 2018 Council for the opening of the accession negotiations.
9. Our negotiations are based on **Article 49 of the Treaty of the European Union** and take account of all relevant Council conclusions, in particular those of March 2020 endorsing the enhanced enlargement methodology, the renewed consensus on enlargement agreed by the December 2006 European Council and the conclusions of the 1993 European Council in Copenhagen.

The Council remains firmly committed to taking the enlargement process forward on the basis of agreed principles and conclusions, which integrate the enhanced methodology so that the accession process is **more predictable, more credible, more dynamic and subject to**

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/near_factograph_north_macedonia.pdf

stronger political steering, based on objective criteria and rigorous positive and negative conditionality, and reversibility.

The EU continues to attach great importance to the coherent implementation of the **renewed consensus on enlargement**, which is based on consolidation of commitments, fair and rigorous conditionality, better communication, combined with the EU's capacity, in all its dimensions, to integrate new members, with each country being assessed on its own merits.

10. In line with the Council conclusions of 25 March 2020, endorsed by the members of the European Council on 26 March 2020, the Council [approved] a general **Negotiating Framework**, taking into account the aforementioned conclusions, as well as other relevant Council conclusions, the renewed consensus on enlargement, and established practice.
11. We will present to you this Negotiating Framework on the basis of the General EU Position, during the next meeting of the intergovernmental conference, which we stand ready to hold without further delays nor additional political decision, as soon as North Macedonia has implemented its commitment to complete the constitutional changes as referred to in the Council Conclusion of XX/XX/2022, in line with its internal procedures.
12. We will also present to you what the EU *acquis* includes.
13. In this perspective, the Council notes that the Commission has advanced its work to carry out and complete the process of analytical examination of the EU *acquis* and stands ready to present in due time its results to North Macedonia. On this basis, it invites the Commission to continue to assess the state of preparation of North Macedonia for opening negotiations in specific areas and identify the issues that will most likely come up in the negotiations, starting with the fundamentals' cluster, which, in accordance with the Negotiating Framework, will be opened first once North Macedonia has met the relevant criteria agreed by the Council.
14. **Regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations** remain essential elements of the enlargement process. North Macedonia should continue to constructively engage in inclusive regional cooperation and strengthen relations with neighbouring countries. Today, we recall the importance of achieving tangible results and implement, in good faith bilateral agreements, including the Prespa Agreement with Greece and the Treaty on Good Neighbourly Relations with Bulgaria.

In this regard, we welcome the agreement on the protocol from the second meeting of the Joint Intergovernmental Commission established under article 12 of this Treaty. This

important step will contribute to the good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation, which remain essential elements of the enlargement process as well as of the Stabilization and Association Process.

15. In the period up to accession, North Macedonia will be required to **progressively align** its policies towards third countries and its positions within international organisations with the policies and positions adopted by the Union and its Member States.
16. Let us also recall that parallel to the accession negotiations, the Union and North Macedonia will continue their **civil society dialogue and cultural cooperation**, with the aim of bringing people closer together and ensuring the support of citizens for the accession process. We expect North Macedonia to accurately and strategically communicate the benefits and obligations of the accession process to its public, including addressing disinformation, in accordance with its pro-European strategic choice.
17. It will remain up to the Member States to decide whether conditions are right for the conclusion of the negotiations, bearing in mind developments in the EU *acquis* since the date of the opening of negotiations, and North Macedonia's readiness for membership.
18. The accession negotiations we start opening today will be rigorous and demanding. With determination and commitment, we are confident in your capacity to bring it to a successful conclusion. We will support you in your efforts and we look forward to welcoming you as a fully-fledged member of the European Union