

Western Balkans: The Missing Puzzle for Completing Europe



The Republic of North Macedonia, with the signing of the Final Agreement for the Settlement of the Differences over the Name with Greece (the so-called Prespa Agreement) and the Agreement on Friendship, Good-Neighbourliness and Cooperation with Bulgaria, presents a unique example of a state which, for the purpose of achieving its strategic goals and by adopting a creative and constructive approach, found solutions for the open bilateral issues with its neighbours. Furthermore, the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement laid new, modern foundations of its internal governance. Thus, our country has become an active contributor to building and strengthening regional cooperation, stability and good-neighbourly relations and, at the same time, a rare and successful model of a functional multiethnic society.

From a country that, in different phases of its transitional past, was subject of an active international engagement to overcome serious crises and challenges – the conflict in 2001 and the political crisis before 2017, that severely undermined its international credibility – managed in a very short period to rise democratically, to successfully implement the national reform agenda and to pursue a successful foreign policy. The new momentum meant a new dynamic not only in the relations with the neighbours, but also, in the relations with the international community, focusing on the cooperation with the countries of the western democracies and paving the way for attaining its strategic goals for full NATO and EU membership.

These agreements are a unique example in the region of Southeast Europe, and beyond, on how to build bridges for overcoming differences, for enhancing mutual confidence, for bringing the citizens from the different sides of the borders closer together and for their prosperity. By applying in practice the European models of resolving outstanding issues, with good faith and dialogue, our country manifested, in a very concrete manner, political commitment and leadership to building and improving the relations with its neighbours and international partners. The agreements, in synergy with the successful implementation of the reform agenda, have determined and strengthened the position of the state at the international level and enabled the vital step forward in attaining its strategic goals. The country, both at the diplomatic and at the international level, has become a model that European and global leaders point out as a success story.



The first international conference in the PFD framework is planned to be held in **Ohrid and Oteshevo/ Prespa, on 1 and 2 July 2021** for the following reasons: the Framework Agreement was signed in Ohrid, the city is located relatively close to Prespa and has the infrastructure required for a large international event, the dates are close to that one of the signing of the Prespa Agreement.

The main event would be held under the auspices of the Prime Minister of the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, and it is expected to be attended by heads of states or governments, high-ranking politicians and diplomats from the region, from other European and non-European countries, international and regional organisations – UN, EU, NATO, Council of Europe, OSCE, Regional Cooperation Council, CEI etc. – local authorities from the three states of the Prespa Region, renowned figures from the academic, business and media communities, civil society, youth organisations etc. The work of the Forum would be conducted by holding one or two plenary sessions, and several thematic panels and side events.



The initial idea for establishing the PFD is connected with the project “EU for Prespa” for support and sustainable development of the Prespa Region, including the cooperation with the border municipalities in the Hellenic Republic and the Republic of Albania, with a total value of 18 million Euros. The project also envisages the construction of a Multimedia Centre for Dialogue and Development of European Values in Prespa. The Centre would be operational over the entire year by organising workshops, roundtables, seminars, conferences etc., with participation of experts with various knowledge and experience, and would employ primarily young people. Once the Centre has been constructed and becomes fully operational, it would also house the Prespa Forum for Dialogue, as well as the civil society organisations that would work on the development of the Prespa Region.



The Government of North Macedonia adopted a decision to establish the Prespa Forum for Dialogue (PFD), taking into consideration the international support for the aforesaid agreements, the experience gained in their implementation and the challenges emerging in this respect, which are all worth sharing with the region and the world, and aiming to send out a message of an original „know-how“ concerning the dialogue, cooperation and resolution of the open bilateral issues.

The PFD draws its raison d'être from the messages and experiences of the three agreements and the development of North Macedonia into a modern, democratic and multiethnic state founded on European values. Certainly, the experiences and challenges of the other countries of the region and beyond in the implementation of bilateral and regional agreements will provide an added value to the PFD.

The PFD should enable a fruitful intellectual and political debate, through formal and informal meetings, between statespersons, political leaders, diplomats, renowned intellectuals, representatives of the academic, business and media communities, the local authorities, the civil society, the youth etc.. This kind of dialogue should produce ideas for processes, practical solutions and possible solutions to open issues of regional and global character and should offer an essential incentive to promote and enrich regional cooperation. In this context, the discussions on the European perspective for the enlargement of the EU with the Western Balkan countries, the fulfilment of which will enable the future generations of the region to live in a European Union that is much more than just a space with a common market and without borders, will also be of particular importance.

The basic goal of the PFD is to be promoted as a platform and place for:

- building bridges and fostering a culture of friendship and confidence, mutual understanding and cooperation, bringing people closer together, overcoming stereotypes, sharing experiences and „lessons learned“ regarding reconciliation between different societies, people or states;
- developing and promoting of good-neighbourly relations and cooperation, exchanging views on possible solutions to outstanding bilateral issues, including those of historical, cultural or linguistic character; continuously mobilizing and assisting the governments, institutions and the civil society, including the youth, for consistent implementation of the spirit and letter of the signed bilateral and regional agreements;
- strengthening regional stability and enriching regional cooperation, as well as promoting a positive image of the region within the international framework, in the context of its European integration;
- debates on global topics, such as Europe in the post-pandemic period, i.e. how much do the consequences of the health crisis affect the attainment of the EU's set priorities and to what degree do they reflect on the internal relations in the EU and on the EU's relations with the other global factors (the USA, Russia, China), the trans-Atlantic relations in the context of their importance for the stability and perspectives of the region.

The idea is that the Forum will not be a one-off event which will be held once a year, but over the entire year to organize other, smaller events under its auspices in the form of thematic workshops, seminars, roundtables etc; our intention is to make the Forum a specific brand by which the Republic of North Macedonia will become even more recognizable on the international scene.

The established positive image of the Republic of North Macedonia and its visible successes at national and international level creates favourable preconditions to make the project a quality product that will contribute to further promotion of the country.



BRIDGE TO A COMMON FUTURE



Republic of North Macedonia
Government of the Republic of North Macedonia



Republic of North Macedonia
Ministry of Foreign Affairs