

REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA: THREE DECADES OF BENEFITS FROM THE EUROPEAN POLITICAL AND SECURITY ARCHITECTURE

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Abstract: Last year marked three decades since the Republic of North Macedonia joined the Council of Europe and the OSCE, joined NATO's Partnership for Peace program, and established diplomatic relations with the EU. These entities are an important segment of the European and Euro-Atlantic political and security architecture.

The Republic of North Macedonia (then under the provisional reference) became a full member of the Council of Europe on 9 November 1995, thereby committing itself to respecting the principles of democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. This membership marked the beginning of the country's integration into European democratic structures.

The Republic's accession to the Council of Europe is one of the most significant events for it, since the declaration of its independence. With it, the Republic joined the European system of law and democracy and created legal standards that significantly influenced the construction and functioning of the Macedonian constitutional system, and within it, especially the judicial system.

The Republic of North Macedonia was admitted to the OSCE in 1992, when the OSCE Mission in Skopje was established with the aim of preventing the spillover of conflicts from the region. The country actively cooperates with the organization, and in 2023 it also took over the chairmanship of this world's largest regional security organization.

The Republic's admission to the OSCE is a rational and very useful step towards building its security system. Its membership in the OSCE contributed to its internal stability, included it in the European security system and helped in the democratic transformation of society after the declaration of independence.

Partnership for Peace (PfP) is a NATO program aimed at cooperation and building trust between NATO members and other countries in Europe and the former USSR. Currently, PfP has 21 member states. The Republic of Macedonia was a member of PfP from 15 November 1995 until 27 March 2020, when it became a member of NATO.

The establishment of diplomatic relations between the Republic of Macedonia and the European Union was delayed due to the opposition of the Republic of Greece to recognizing the Republic of Macedonia under its constitutional name. However, full diplomatic relations between the Republic of Macedonia and the European Union were established in December 1995, when the Republic's mission to the European Union was opened.

The establishment of diplomatic relations of the Republic with the European Union is its most strategically important foreign policy move after the declaration of independence. With it, the country has focused on the European political and economic system and has created a framework for deep legal and institutional reforms.

The paper analyzes the benefits of the Republic of North Macedonia from its previous membership in the Council of Europe, the OSCE, as well as from the establishment of diplomatic relations with the European Union with a special emphasis on political, economic and security aspects.

Keywords: admission, accession, establishment, benefits, stability.

1. INTRODUCTION

Three decades after its independence, the Republic of North Macedonia is gradually being integrated into the European and Euro-Atlantic political and security architecture. This process is neither short nor easy (Naumovski, 2022). On the contrary, it is marked by political conditioning, regional disputes (Pendarovski, 2025), internal conflicts and dilemmas about the price the country must pay to become part of the Western political and security system.

Early membership in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Council of Europe enabled the country to enter the sphere of European democratic standards and mechanisms for security and human rights protection. This created an institutional framework that helped stabilize the young democratic society and for international recognition of the democratic political system of the country.

The first serious step towards the inclusion of the Republic of North Macedonia in the Euro-Atlantic security architecture, before full membership in NATO, was the accession to the Partnership for Peace Program (1995). By joining this program, the Republic clearly demonstrated its foreign policy orientation towards Euro-Atlantic democratic and security institutions. It was a clear signal, given by the Republic, both to the allies and to the region. The program enabled the modernization of the Army and the harmonization of its defense system with NATO

standards. It achieved practical military and security cooperation through joint exercises, training and missions. It enabled quality preparation of the Republic for future NATO membership.

The crowning achievement of this long process was the accession of the Republic of North Macedonia to NATO, which occurred in 2020. By entering the collective defense system, the Republic received a strong security guarantee and positioned itself as part of the Euro-Atlantic area of stability (Dimtrovski, 2025). For a small state, at the sensitive Balkan crossroads, this has a significance that goes beyond purely military aspects.

But the integration process has its own political price. The path to European and Euro-Atlantic political and security structures so far has been accompanied by difficult compromises and long diplomatic negotiations with the European Union within the framework of established diplomatic relations. That is why the assessment of these three decades cannot be one-sided. Those negotiations brought greater security and international positioning but, at the same time, opened questions about national concessions in the name of integration (Gaber, 2025). However, seen from a historical perspective, the most important result is the fact that North Macedonia, from the periphery of Balkan instability, became part of the European system of security and cooperation in a world in which geopolitical upheavals constantly return uncertainty (Sulejmani and Gjurovski 2021). That position represents a significant capital for the future of the state embodied in the benefits of the Republic's membership in the aforementioned Euro-Atlantic institutions and organizations and from diplomatic relations with the European Union. Each of these benefits represents a step forward towards strengthening the international position of the Republic and towards building a democratic society, with stable and efficient state bodies, organizations and institutions with which the Republic will be able to achieve the goals of its constitutional order: strengthening the rule of law, guaranteeing human rights and civil liberties, ensuring peace and coexistence, social justice, economic well-being and progress, and the personal and common life of its citizens (Pollozhani, 2011).

2. BENEFITS OF NORTH MACEDONIA'S MEMBERSHIP IN THE ORGANIZATION FOR SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE (OSCE)

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) is defined as a regional organization under the auspices of the United Nations that serves for early warning, conflict prevention, crisis management and post-conflict rehabilitation. Its 56 member states are from Europe, the Caucasus Region, Central Asia and North America, which, in essence, covers most of the northern hemisphere. The organization was created during the so-called Cold War as a West-East forum. Before growing into a permanent organization, it operated as the Congress on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) between 1973 and 1995.

The OSCE in Skopje has its own mission. The Mission's key priorities are to improve constructive inter-ethnic relations and to support the future implementation of the 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement and its core tenets: anti-discrimination, education, decentralization, equitable representation of smaller communities and the use of languages. The Mission works with institutions to implement reforms in the areas of elections, democratic policing, local government and the judiciary. The Mission monitors and conducts regular visits to local communities and maintains a communication network with political representatives, members of civil society, religious leaders and the police.

The Republic's membership in this organization brings several significant political, security and development benefits to the country.

Above all, OSCE membership provides ongoing international support for the advancement of democratic processes, the rule of law and human rights. The OSCE, through its institutions such as the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and the Mission, conducts election observation activities and makes recommendations for improving electoral processes.

Furthermore, the OSCE has security cooperation as one of its key areas of work. Through monitoring, dialogue and conflict resolution, the organization helps prevent conflicts and build trust between communities.

Through OSCE programs, North Macedonia receives technical assistance and expert support for rule of law reforms, the fight against corruption and organized crime, increasing the efficiency of the police and judiciary, and establishing tolerance and non-discrimination.

The OSCE encourages interethnic dialogue and contributes to strengthening social cohesion. Within this framework, it supports the implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement and provides and supports initiatives for building harmonious interethnic relations through various programs and projects.

OSCE membership means participation in the diplomatic and political scene of Europe and Eurasia. The republic, in 2023, assumed the function of the OSCE Chairman-in-Office, which gave it an additional opportunity to promote its foreign policy and contribute to the formulation of the organization's priorities.

The OSCE has a strong mandate to protect human rights, especially for underrepresented groups, gender equality, media freedom, and fairness in public life. These activities help to improve legal and social standards in the country.

3. BENEFITS OF NORTH MACEDONIA'S MEMBERSHIP IN THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE

The Council of Europe is the leading human rights organization on the continent. It consists of 46 member states, including all members of the European Union (Borchard K. D, 2000). All member states of the Council of Europe are signatories to the European Convention on Human Rights, a treaty for the protection of human rights, democracy and the rule of law (Rachich, 1995). The Council has a program office in Skopje, which was established in 2012.

The Republic's membership in the Council of Europe has provided its citizens with protection of human rights outside the national judiciary. Macedonian citizens have gained the right to turn to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in Strasbourg if they believe that the state has violated their rights. This creates additional protection outside the national courts (Borchard K. D, 2000),.

In terms of strengthening the rule of law, the Council of Europe sets high standards for: independent judiciary, fair trial, the fight against corruption, transparency and accountability of institutions. Through expert missions and recommendations, laws and institutional practice are improved.

The Council of Europe then contributes to the Promotion of Democracy. Within this framework, it provides support for: free and fair elections, parliamentary democracy, local self-government (European Charter of Local Self-Government), strengthening of democratic culture and institutions.

Furthermore, the Council of Europe contributes to the Protection of Minority and Linguistic Rights by implementing: the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, which is important for the multiethnic character of the state.

The contribution of the Council of Europe to the fight against corruption and organized crime through membership in GRECO and regular assessments and recommendations for improving corruption prevention systems is very significant.

The contribution of the Council of Europe to legal and institutional harmonization with Europe by harmonizing legislation with European standards is of extraordinary importance, which strengthens legal certainty and facilitates the path to the European Union.

Membership in the Council of Europe confirms the Republic as part of the European democratic family and strengthens its international legitimacy and trust among partners. Finally, the Council of Europe provides support in reforms and education through training for judges, prosecutors and administration, as well as through programs for human rights, media, youth and civil society.

4. BENEFITS OF NORTH MACEDONIA'S MEMBERSHIP IN THE NATO PARTNERSHIP FOR PEACE PROGRAM

The Partnership for Peace is a process that brings together NATO Allies and Partner countries in a broad program of joint defense and defense activities, ranging from military cooperation to defense cooperation in various fields, such as conflict prevention, civil assistance programs, air traffic management or armaments cooperation. PfP is an open and transparent program and its activities are open to all Partners and Allies (Kuzev, 2002).

The membership of the Republic of North Macedonia in this program has brought increased security and stability through inclusion in the European and Euro-Atlantic security system, reduction of security risks in the region of South-East Europe as a sensitive region, better preparedness for dealing with crises, conflicts and threats.

Subsequently, the Republic's membership in the Partnership for Peace contributed to the modernization and professionalization of the Army through the harmonization of the ARM with NATO standards (training, equipment, command), joint exercises and drills with the armies of member states and improved interoperability with allied forces (Kuzev, 2000).

In this regard, the Republic's membership in the Partnership for Peace contributed to a better response to crises and natural disasters through training and coordination in dealing with fires, floods and earthquakes and better civil-military cooperation.

Furthermore, it enabled efficient democratic and civilian control over the armed forces by strengthening the role of Parliament and civilian institutions, transparency and accountability in the defense sector and reforms in the defense and security services.

Membership in the Partnership for Peace has contributed to the international affirmation of the Republic and trust in it with a clear signal that the country belongs to the democratic and security space of the West, increased trust among foreign partners and investors, and an active role in international missions (ISAF, KFOR, IRAQ, EUFOR). Numerous members and units of the Army of the Republic of North Macedonia participated in these missions.

Membership in the Partnership for Peace has made a huge contribution to the preparation of the Republic for full membership in NATO. It has played a key role in the preparations for NATO membership, which is to be realized in 2020, especially in the technical and political readiness to assume the obligations of an ally.

Taking into account the provisions of Articles 5 and 6 of the North Atlantic Treaty (Kuzev, 2002), with NATO membership, the Republic of North Macedonia has come under a powerful defense and security umbrella that, together with its armed forces (ARSM and parts of the Police), protects its sovereignty and territorial integrity and provides conditions for the safe development of its socio-political system.

5. BENEFITS OF ESTABLISHING DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS BETWEEN NORTH MACEDONIA AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

Diplomatic relations between North Macedonia and the European Union were formalized on 22 December 1995, with the opening of the country's Mission to the EU. The relations are based on the Stabilization and Association Agreement (signed in 2001, entered into force in 2004) and membership is a strategic goal, with negotiations and candidate country status launched in 2005.

Key moments in diplomatic relations between our country and the EU are the following:

- establishment of full diplomatic relations and opening of the Republic of Macedonia's Mission to the EU - 1995 (December);
- signed Cooperation Agreement and Agreement in the field of transport - 1997 (April);
- Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) signed - 2001 (April);
- EU membership application submitted - 2004 (March);
- candidate country status obtained - 2005 (December);
- EU decided to start membership negotiations with North Macedonia - 2020;
- first intergovernmental conference held, formally starting the negotiation phase - 2022 (July).

The establishment of diplomatic relations between the Republic of North Macedonia and the European Union, as we know, brings multifaceted benefits - political, economic, legal and social (Priebe, 2024).

First, it contributed to the political stability and international legitimacy of the Republic by strengthening the international position and credibility of the state, inclusion in European political processes, dialogue with EU institutions and support for democratic institutions and the rule of law.

It then provided a clear perspective for EU membership, enabled a structured reform process through accession negotiations and harmonization of legislation with European standards (*acquis communautaire* – Borchard. K.D, 2000)

Furthermore, it enabled financial and development support for the Republic with access to significant European funds (IPA funds). Financing of infrastructure, education, health, agriculture and environment, technical assistance and expert support for reforms.

In this regard, the establishment of diplomatic relations with the EU enabled economic benefits such as: improving the investment climate and increased interest from foreign investors, easier access to the EU market, as well as an incentive for economic growth, exports and the creation of new jobs. In this regard, it is necessary to emphasize that the European Union is the most important trading partner of the Republic, to which the Republic exports about 80% of its exports (Angelovska – Bezhoska, 2025).

Diplomatic relations with the EU enabled legal and institutional modernization, through strengthening the judiciary, the fight against corruption and organized crime, improving public administration and transparency and protecting human rights and minorities according to European standards (Borchard K. D, 2000),.

It brought social and educational benefits, through participation in programs such as Erasmus+, Horizon Europe. and others, greater mobility for students, scientists and youth and improving the quality of education and science.

It has strengthened security and regional cooperation by supporting regional stability and good neighborly relations and by aligning with the EU's common foreign and security policy.

The final result of the established diplomatic relations with the EU is the formal launch of negotiations for the Republic's membership in the Union in 2020.

6. CONCLUSION

Dialectically speaking, with the membership in the aforementioned European and Euro-Atlantic institutions and with the establishment of diplomatic relations with the European Union, the Republic of North Macedonia found itself in a progressive democratic environment. Among it, as a state, with its own state bodies, organizations and institutions, interaction with the aforementioned institutions has come about. Interaction with a more advanced and more democratic environment always brings benefits to the state that is integrating, and in this case it is our state – the Republic of North Macedonia. This conclusion provides a synthetic review of what has been previously analyzed in relation to those benefits.

The membership of the Republic of North Macedonia in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) represents an important segment of its integration into the European security and democratic architecture.

Through this organization, the Republic participates in a system of collective security, conflict prevention and protection of human rights. The OSCE, with its mission and expert support, contributes to the development of institutions, the rule of law and trust between communities. In a region with a complex history and sensitive political balance, such cooperation has particular value. Therefore, membership in the OSCE is not only a formal presence in this international organization, but a guarantee that stability, dialogue and democracy are a permanent strategic commitment of the state. In short, the OSCE brings the Republic practical support in building democratic institutions and the rule of law, contributes to security and social cohesion, improves the international position of the state and provides access to expert assistance and reform programs.

The Republic's membership in the Council of Europe represents one of the key milestones in its modern political and legal history. By joining this oldest pan-European organization, the Republic has confirmed its determination to build its institutions on the foundations of democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights. Membership means acceptance of the system of protection established by the European Convention on Human Rights and the opportunity for citizens to seek justice before the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, when domestic legal remedies have been exhausted. Thus, the rights and freedoms of Macedonian citizens have received a broader European guarantee. At the same time, membership in this organization has included the Republic in the European network of legal standards, institutional cooperation and democratic monitoring. It is not just a diplomatic act, but a process of gradual harmonization with the values that shape modern Europe.

The Republic's membership in the Council of Europe represents its inclusion in the European system of freedoms, rights and legal civilization. It is a real protective and reform mechanism that directly benefits citizens through better protection of rights, stronger institutions and a more stable democracy.

The Republic's membership in the Partnership for Peace Program was the first real step towards the Euro-Atlantic security community. Through this program, the Republic began to adopt NATO standards, values and practices. It was a school of reform, trust and cooperation with the armies of democratic states and their defense systems. The Partnership for Peace opened the way for the modernization of the Republic's defense system and for active participation in international missions. It was a bridge through which the Republic became a full member of NATO. In short, it was a strategic instrument for security, reform and international integration, which directly contributed to the stability of the Republic and the region and opened the door to NATO entry.

Diplomatic relations between North Macedonia and the European Union have a multifaceted significance. First, they embed the state in the European system of values: rule of law, democracy and protection of human rights. Through institutional dialogue and the process of approximation, the country gradually aligns its institutions with European standards.

Then, diplomatic relations with the European Union open access to the European market, funds and development programs. The Union is the largest trading partner and investor, which means more opportunities for the development of infrastructure, economy and regional connectivity.

From a strategic perspective, these relations position the Republic in the broader European political and security architecture, thereby strengthening the stability of the Balkans. Through diplomatic relations with the EU, a kind of strategic framework is achieved that enables the Republic to achieve long-term development, stability and integration into the European political, economic and value family.

The membership of the Republic of North Macedonia in the aforementioned European and Euro-Atlantic institutions and the establishment of diplomatic relations with the European Union constitute a key pillar of its state and security policy. In summary, this has strengthened the international position of the Republic, fostered the democratic transformation of Macedonian society, and created better conditions for economic development and long-term stability.

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