

## **Austria and Slovakia to help Skopje move closer to EU**

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and*

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Today marks the first time two EU foreign ministers will conjointly visit Macedonia. It is a signal that we want to further strengthen our friendly relations and make joint progress in areas of common interest.

Both Austria and Slovakia are strong supporters of the European integration process. We are members of the Schengen and euro zones. Naturally, we also support EU enlargement as we are convinced that a strong, competitive and prosperous Union will better address future challenges.

Our support for European and Euro-Atlantic integration, even though Austria is not a Nato member, is evident in the political domain. But more importantly, it is demonstrated through a number of activities and projects with the view to help Macedonia transform its economy and society.

Technical and development assistance, projects financed by the Instrument for pre-Accession, entrepreneurial activities and cooperation among wide segments of civil society are just some examples.

Through those activities, we are also able to share with Macedonia our own experience and best practices from participation in the European integration project as well as transformation and adaptation processes.

We do not believe in so-called enlargement fatigue. As Serbia, Croatia and Montenegro demonstrate, enlargement is on track. If aspirants deliver, so does the EU.

We are aware that a name dispute is a central and highly sensitive - but bilateral issue - between two countries. Nevertheless, we remain convinced that this issue should no longer block Macedonia's EU integration process. We believe that the time has come to take necessary steps and to move forward.

Macedonia can be proud of what it has achieved. In its last report, the European Commission reiterated its recommendation to open accession negotiations with the country.

The recent NATO summit in Chicago not only appreciated Macedonian contributions to NATO's operations and its active role in regional cooperation activities, but also confirmed that Macedonia's place is among the allies.

However, the world and the Union are evolving.

What was sufficient yesterday and today, will not be enough tomorrow. The Union, for example, is searching for solutions to financial and economic problems that it faces.

In a few years' time the Union will look and function in a different way to today.

What can one do? Keep the reform process on track. Focus on work. Try to find the best solution and implement best practices. Widen the scope of opportunities. Do not divide but rather try to find common platforms. Act in this way for the sake of people, not for the sake of few individuals, or for the sake of meeting some formal conditions.

The voices of friendly nations such as Austria and Slovakia matter in your endeavour. We want to build upon the progress already achieved in order to soon translate it into progress on the EU integration path.

Therefore, we especially welcome the EU high-level accession dialogue and commend the government for demonstrating the ownership of this dialogue, notably by adopting and implementing a roadmap in consultation with parliament and civil society.

We view the dialogue both as a bridge to accession talks and an opportunity for accelerating such talks once they have started.

Among the five key areas addressed through the dialogue, we note Macedonia's progress towards enhancing the foundations and preconditions for a functioning market economy and in meeting remaining challenges with a view to create a favourable environment for foreign investors.

For Macedonia, the Ohrid Framework Agreement remains an essential element for democracy and the rule of law.

Recent events have confirmed the importance of strengthening relations between the communities.

We therefore welcome constructive and unanimous responses by the Macedonian parliament's committee on intercommunal relations to the developments resulting from these events and its endeavours in exploring ways to achieve long-term preventive measures that, we believe, could improve the level of interethnic co-existence in Macedonia.

We have been and will continue to remain closely involved in Macedonia and in the region. In this spirit, we look forward to our joint visit to Skopje.

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