

North Macedonia facing "unprecedented exodus" if accession talks postponed, warns president

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News

Stevo Pendarovski has said his country is suffering from "enlargement fatigue".



Photo credit:

North Macedonia's president has admitted that "enlargement fatigue" may be impeding his country's accession to the EU.

But, speaking in Brussels on Wednesday, President Stevo Pendarovski said that "enlargement fatigue" applied not only to the EU but to his people.

He said, "There is enlargement fatigue on both sides and I understand that. I understand that some in the EU Member States may be disappointed with the results of the 'big bang' enlargement 15 years ago."

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“But people in my country have been in the waiting room for accession talks to start for many years and they too are suffering from enlargement fatigue. You have to remember that we have done what no other country has ever had to do to join the EU: change the country’s name.”

Pendarovski was speaking after a meeting with European Council President Donald Tusk in Brussels on Wednesday.

The talks focused on the opening of accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania.

He said that over the last two years, North Macedonia has delivered reforms, reached the historic Prespa agreement with Greece, putting an end to a nearly 30-year long dispute, and an “agreement for friendship, good neighbourly relations and cooperation agreement with Bulgaria.”

He pointed out that by the end of May, the European Commission had asked EU Member States again to open membership negotiations with North Macedonia underlining this “bright example” in the Balkan region.

“People in my country feel exhausted at the failure to get these talks underway. This is what was promised by the EU and the EU must now deliver on its promise” **Stevo Pendarovski, President of North Macedonia**

There are fears that Member States may put off the start of talks when the issue is debated at an EU summit in Brussels on 21 June.

Pendarovski warned of the consequences if that happens, saying that disillusionment would lead to an “unprecedented” exodus from the country, particularly of young people.

He said, “If talks do not start thousands of people will leave and they will leave indefinitely.”

Addressing a Friends of Europe debate on the accession of North Macedonia and Albania, he said that up to 90 percent of the population was in favour of EU integration and a further delay in the start of accession talks would cause further dismay among his people.

He said, “Many are still puzzled why the talks have not yet started and this was the message I gave to Donald Tusk at our meeting today. People in my country feel exhausted at the failure to get these talks underway. This is what was promised by the EU and the EU must now deliver on its promise. After Turkey no country has been waiting longer than mine for EU accession talks to start.”

Pendarovski, who also supports Albania’s accession bid, said the country had “delivered on what the

EU had asked for and it was now time for the EU to also deliver.”

Meanwhile, his country is also in process of ratification of the protocol for NATO membership and hoping to become the 30th member state of the Alliance.

Pendarovski told a packed audience there was equal support for NATO membership in North Macedonia, adding that he was confident the country would meet the two percent defence spending target by 2024.

He said that at present the country spends 1.2 percent of its GDP on defence.

“The agreements the country reached with Bulgaria and Greece are nothing historic and examples to be followed by your region and beyond” **Donald Tusk, EU Council President**

Pendarovski was elected president last month and Tusk praised his “undisputed election victory which shows the new trust among citizens and political forces in the democratic process.”

Tusk, speaking after their meeting, said the elections also confirmed the country's “Euro-Atlantic orientation.”

Tusk said, “The agreements the country reached with Bulgaria and Greece are nothing historic and examples to be followed by your region and beyond.”

“Over the last two years, the country has delivered all the right political signals that the EU was expecting from the candidates. The opening of accession talks was at the centre of our discussions today.”

North Macedonia has “done everything that was expected.”

He added, “But I want to be honest - not all Member States are prepared to make the decision on opening negotiations in the coming days. I personally believe that there can only be one decision: to launch the negotiations in line with the European Commission's recommendations, both with North Macedonia and Albania.”

“The question today is, not if, but when. If I am a bit cautious, it is because I know that, sometimes, reaching consensus among 28 member states takes more time than I would like.”

About the author

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