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July 2018



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IN ANTICIPATION OF THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL DECISION ON OPENING ACCESSION TALKS...

By Barbara Matias

In the case of the next European Union enlargement, domestic interests of the different EU Member States have long been an obstruction or encouragement factor. Some countries are strong advocates, others fear further expanding borders or setting a precedent given Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence. It has long been a divisive issue that exposes cracks in the attempted unified voice of the EU28 as a foreign policy actor.

Two months after the European Commission (EC) published the new EU Enlargement Strategy which offered a 2025 timeline for Serbia and Montenegro's accession, it further proposed opening accession talks with candidate countries Albania and Macedonia. However, before taking flight, this EC proposal needs to be approved in the upcoming European Council meeting on 28 June 2018. This means all Member States need to give the final thumbs up to the EC's preliminary green light. And this means there is no margin for cracks in the unified. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

The bid Albania and Macedonia have made to open accession negotiations lies in the willingness to avoid risks of increased instability in the region and focuses on the progress already made with ongoing reforms. Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama has highlighting that robbing Albania of a European future can fuel radicalization and leave an influence gap Russia is bound to exploit¹; and Macedonian leaders have been lobbying with a concessionary tone in order to prevent the opening of negotiations be vetoed by Greece once more due to the ongoing naming dispute.

Varied arguments are bargained for in attempts to definitely assure accession talks begin - yet such a step is still up for the taking. Several European leaders put up a cautious front upon hearing the news of the EC's preliminary green light and during the EU-Western Balkans summit in Bulgaria on 17 May, better revealing the roadway candidates must trek and conquer.

In matters of forging ahead with EU expansion, French President Emmanuel Macron has taken on a perspective that privileges collective European interests over enlargement ambitions. Noting recent internal struggles that have shaken up the core values and formation of the EU, Macron asserted that "I am in favor of anchoring the Balkans in Europe. But I am not in favor of moving toward enlargement before having all the necessary certainty and having made a real reform to allow a deepening and better functioning of the European Union"². In truth, not only the six Western Balkan countries need to prepare to accede to the Union, but also the institutions themselves must be prepared to accept new Member States. Macron defended that "I don't want a Balkans that turns toward Turkey or Russia, but I don't want a Europe that, functioning with difficulty at 28 and tomorrow as

¹ Euractiv, "Don't turn your back on us, Albania PM tells EU", April 25 2018, available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/dont-turn-your-back-on-us-albania-pm-tells-eu/>.

² Politico, "Macron pours cold water on Balkan EU membership hopes", May 17 2018, available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macron-pours-cold-water-balkans-eu-membership-enlargement/>.

27, would decide that we can continue to gallop off, to be tomorrow 30 or 32, with the same rules”³. Such a prudent stance is shared by other European leaders.

From a more objective and report-based perspective, German Chancellor Angela Merkel has stressed that EU membership must be merit-based. She vests more importance in meeting rule of law or regional disputes pre-conditions rather than fear-mongering arguments from hopeful candidates⁴. Such an instance is her reminder to Albania that a full crackdown on nation-wide corruption and organized crime is still essential despite progress on judicial reform. Germany’s Minister of State for Europe himself has come on record to praise Albania and Macedonia’s progress but cautioned against stating Germany will undoubtedly support opening membership talks, before national consultation or reaching a consensual opinion with EU partners⁵.

On the other hand, Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz spoke in direct allusion to arguments rooted in Russian influence - “If there is no European perspective in the Balkans, then the Turkish influence and other influence becomes stronger and stronger. We don't want that to happen”⁶. After all, one of the priorities of the soon-to-start Austrian Presidency of the Council of the EU is working towards EU accession for Western Balkan countries.

In consideration of the three contrasting opinions presented - those of three key players in the EU enlargement game - it is noticeable that the European Union knows what it wants but does not know how to achieve it. While on the one hand the Union itself must be preserved by accepting fully-ready states only, it is also true that time is pressing as external influences loom. The upcoming European Council decision on opening membership talks with Albania and Macedonia will assemble all such voices and hesitations into a single vote, either moving past the impasse or further consolidating frustrated expectations.

When all is said and little is done, there are many differences in approaches given different geostrategic factors affecting a specific Member State and their interests in the Western Balkan region. All eyes are now on the June EU-Western Balkans summit and the mirroring European Council meeting on 28 June 2018. To cite Angela Merkel after the May summit in Bulgaria, “[the issue of enlargement] remains for the June EU Summit”⁷. To be determined if the baton won’t be further passed or postponed onto another summit down the road.

³ Euractiv, “The Brief – Macron pulls the Balkan rug”, April 25 2018, available at:

<https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/the-brief-macron-pulls-the-balkan-rug/>.

⁴ The Parliament Magazine, “Western Balkans summit: More work to be done ahead of accession talks”, 18 May 2018, available at: <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/articles/news/western-balkans-summit-more-work-be-done-ahead-accession-talks>

⁵ Politico, “Spain, France upset Brussels’ Balkan plans”, May 16 2018, available at:

<https://www.politico.eu/article/johannes-hahn-mariano-rajoy-emmanuel-macron-balkan-enlargement-spain-france-upset-brussels-balkan-plans/>

⁶ RFE/RL, “EU Leaders Stress Ties to Western Balkans, But Cautious On Enlargement”, May 17 2018, available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/first-eu-western-balkan-summit-15-years-focus-on-integration-tusk-/29231431.html>.

⁷ Balkan Insight, “Macedonia Hopes for 'Miracle' Over EU Membership Talks”, May 29 2018, available at:

<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonia-albania-hope-to-persuade-eu-enlargement-skeptics-05-28-2018>.

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