

Enlargement to the Balkans: Playing hardball or playing with fire?

Corina Stratulat

Albania and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia had their work cut out by yesterday's General Affairs Council (GAC) to be able to formally open accession negotiations with the EU at the earliest in June, next year. This conditional offer reflects the rigour that presently defines the enlargement process, which seeks to prevent the Balkan countries from prematurely entering the EU. However, laying down such a hard line for Tirana and Skopje at this moment risks undermining the credibility of enlargement policy at a time when it is most needed, both in these countries and in the rest of the Balkan region.

A new momentum

In April this year, the European Commission proposed that the Council should decide to start accession talks with Albania and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, in recognition of the progress that the two countries have made on their respective EU tracks.

Besides advancing on key reform priorities linked to the depoliticisation of public administration, the protection of fundamental rights, and the fight against corruption and organised crime, Albania has undertaken a radical overhaul of its justice system, changing a third of its Constitution and pioneering a vetting law for judges and prosecutors with the unanimous support of the parliament. For a country where political polarisation has been a constant struggle, these achievements are no small feat.

The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia was the first country in the Balkans to succeed in ending 'stabilocracy' last year when Nikola Gruevski's government was finally ousted from power, and fresh leadership ushered in on an ambitious reform agenda. What is more, this month, the Macedonian Prime Minister, Zoran Zaev, and his Greek counterpart, Alexis Tsipras, signed an agreement – subsequently ratified by the Macedonian parliament – whereby the country would change its name to "North Macedonia" (pending approval in a referendum). In doing so, the country broke new ground in the acrimonious name dispute with Greece, which had long blocked its Euro-Atlantic integration.

The European Commission's positive recommendations for Albania and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, while acknowledging the historical significance of these countries' reform efforts, are only the latest developments to cast a warm glow over the EU's tired enlargement policy. At the beginning of 2018, the Commission also released an enhanced strategy for the region, with new flagship initiatives and even a reference to 2025 as a possible accession date for the front-runners, Montenegro and Serbia. These have been widely interpreted as signals of a more reliable engagement between the EU and the Balkans.

However, it would be misguided to look at the Commission for proof of an enlargement renaissance. Enlargement is an intergovernmental dossier, where EU capitals have the last word on all decisions. Halfway through 2018, Austria and Bulgaria might have embraced enlargement as a priority of their Council presidencies, but the member states have not endorsed the Commission's new strategy for the Balkans. Moreover, at the Sofia Summit this May – the first high-level meeting of its kind in 15 years – Spain did not attend on account of Kosovo's participation and the French President Emmanuel Macron chose the worst possible moment to state the obvious: namely that the EU needs internal reform and consolidation. Also, last Thursday,

a large majority in the Dutch parliament voted against the opening of EU negotiations with Albania, foretelling the position that the country's government adopted these days in Brussels. Little surprise then to read yesterday's GAC rhetorical gymnastics on enlargement.

But a missed opportunity

The stream of tepid news coming from the member states defies the EU's lofty talk about the Balkans' clear European perspective, suggesting that the Union's commitment to the dossier is more aspirational than actual.

Reluctant players, especially the Netherlands and France, claim that reforms are still underdeveloped and sluggish in Albania and would rather wait for the result of the Macedonian name referendum before considering whether the agreement is a done deal. Moreover, as the accession negotiations of Montenegro and Serbia keep dragging on, EU capitals would like to avoid a similar loss of reform momentum in Tirana and Skopje by not giving away the incentive of opening talks too soon.

The convergence of the Balkan countries with EU standards is indeed more important than the region's hasty European integration – and much remains to be done. But the Union's leverage in the Balkans rests on the credibility of its enlargement policy. This credibility requires a better toolkit to affect change on the ground. The member states should not expect the countries of the region to become sustainable democracies without proper EU guidance and engagement. Effective means to assist the Balkan aspirants in meeting the EU's strict democratic conditionality are still lacking. Calling out state capture and fretting about democratic flaws in the region will not suffice to engender good governance. Diagnosing problems should not be confused with finding solutions. And asking the region for solutions the EU itself does not have, should not be used as an excuse to keep the Balkans at arm's length.

The credibility of enlargement also depends on the EU striking the right balance between conditions and incentives. Albania and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia should press on with reforms and deliver results, as EU leaders demand. However, the start of negotiations – which is neither a pass for membership nor a waiver for reforms – could have gone a long way towards supporting the recent political courage and momentum of transformation in these countries. The governments in Tirana and Skopje are at a critical juncture where they need all the encouragement they can get from the EU to maintain cross-party consensus on the judicial package and secure popular backing in the name referendum, respectively.

What difference will another year make now for the slender thread by which these countries' reform efforts are hanging? Delaying tactics proved counterproductive in the past, especially in the Macedonian case – resorting to the same strategy again and expecting different results is not a rational choice. And the 2019 European, Albanian, Macedonian, Dutch, and Greek elections are not likely to make the decision any easier next June. Instead, this deferral risks turning the great promise that these countries hold today into a great peril that their reforms will lose traction in the future.

Ultimately, hesitant member states proved incapable of looking beyond the myopic frames of their domestic politics and public opinion on enlargement (which is only about 30% in favour). Thus, the EU failed to live up to its own rhetoric and show the Balkans that hard work – of the kind that Albania and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia have done – pays off. This has increased the risk of reform backlash. The opportunity to consolidate the EU's political space and trip up the antics of other external actors in the region also seems to have been lost. As Richard Haass would say, what governments choose to do or not to do can make a real difference and, over time, can make history. Let's hope that this June European Council will have made 'history' worth remembering.

Corina Stratulat is Senior Policy Analyst and the Head of the European Politics and Institutions programme at the European Policy Centre.

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