

Commissioner Fule wants prospective EU membership to be offered to Eastern European countries

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Over the past few months, Stefan Fule, the European Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy, has expressed a positive approach in his statements to offering prospective EU membership to the countries located in the EU's eastern neighbourhood. On 22 October, during the EU-Moldova Forum, he admitted that Chisinau deserved to be granted such prospective membership, and made a reference to article 49 of the Treaty on European Union, which affords any European country which respects European values the possibility of becoming an EU member state. He had previously made similar statements concerning, for example, Georgia (11 July), Ukraine (13 September) and neighbouring Eastern European countries in general (1 June). He also emphasised on this occasion that there was no compromise regarding this issue inside the EU.

Commentary

- Stefan Fule is the first EU commissioner to have expressed in public a positive view on granting prospective EU membership to those Eastern European countries which are interested in it. Representatives of the European Commission have avoided taking any definite stance on this issue due to the lack of consent from most member states. Officially, the EU does not rule out the possibility of accession for these countries, but (unlike in the case of Western Balkans) it has not offered this to them. The most favourable stance has been taken by the European Parliament, whose members have recognised several times that a membership perspective should be granted to Eastern European countries.
- Fule's statements are not a binding political decision from the EU, but they reflect a certain change in the approach adopted by EU institutions. The change in the European Commission's rhetoric used with regard to Eastern European countries over possible membership is an instrument aimed at: 1) political reinforcement of the EU's image among neighbouring Eastern European countries; 2) encouraging the neighbouring countries to intensify their efforts aimed at European integration, which have been restricted due to the lack of a membership perspective; 3) strengthening the pro-

European political forces in the neighbouring countries.

- Fule's words have been received especially favourably in Moldova, where the government saw it as support for its policy. In turn, no response to the commissioner's statements has been heard from Georgia (the parliamentary elections have been the predominant issue there) and Ukraine (due to the crisis in relations between Brussels and Kyiv).
- At present, there is no chance that membership perspective will be given to Eastern European countries since many EU member states are opposed to this. For this reason, Fule's gestures are of limited political significance. This is a consequence of the present situation inside the EU, whose further direction of development is unclear due to the decision-making crisis (for example, it is possible that a 'two-speed Union' will emerge and that the EU will be divided into the eurozone and the other member states). The European Commission's role is also weakening, and the key political significance in the decision-making process remains with individual member states.