

Accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia: a dispute inside the EU

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On 15 October, the General Affairs Council (GAC), a body functioning within the Council of the European Union, was unable to reach a compromise on accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania. France and most likely also the Netherlands resisted the launch of the talks with the two countries. The GAC has already postponed making a decision regarding this issue on two occasions (in June 2018 and in 2019). This time the countries which want the negotiations to begin did not agree to postpone it once again, and the GAC did not pass any decision to this effect. This issue will be considered during the session of the European Council on 17 October. The GAC is expected to deal with it once again this month.

Commentary

- France is arguing that the EU should be reformed before more countries can be offered membership. The French government has also questioned the methodology used in evaluating the situation and has insisted that the European Commission should submit one more report on the progress of reforms in the two countries. Both of these arguments are unjustified. Firstly, no state has a chance of joining the EU before 2027, which is enough time to reform the EU, and France is using the enlargement policy to force the other EU member states to take part in the debate on the EU's internal reform. Secondly, the European Commission has recommended the Council of the EU to open negotiations with the two countries, and it is difficult to expect that another document prepared by the European Commission will differ significantly from the reports published in May, which served as grounds for the positive recommendation. Raising this issue should be viewed as playing for time. The French government has also argued that the public does not want new countries to join the EU due to the threats linked to organised crime originating in the Balkans. President Macron's party stoked these fears during the election campaign, and blocking the launch of the negotiations is likely to exacerbate those problems, because the Balkan states will have no motivation to implement the reforms.
- The Netherlands supports opening the negotiations with North Macedonia but it has serious doubts as regards the launch of accession talks with Albania. Corruption and organised crime levels there are the sources of concern. The Dutch parliament has

expressed a negative opinion on the proposal to open negotiations with Albania, but the government would most likely not decide to block a positive decision on its own. Similar doubts about Albania were expressed by Germany's Bundestag, which only conditionally agreed to open the negotiations. However, Germany backed the decision to start the talks with both countries.

- The way the discussion during the GAC meeting unfolded indicates that there is a conflict inside the EU over the future of enlargement policy. Withholding a decision on opening the negotiations has seriously undermined the EU's credibility in the Western Balkan region and in the Eastern neighbourhood. This policy was based on the assumption that, after meeting the conditions determined by the EU, the Balkan countries would be able to count on enhancing integration with the EU. At present, this rule no longer works since both countries have complied with the conditions set by the EU. Albania has implemented a comprehensive judiciary reform, and North Macedonia, for the sake of good neighbourly relations, reached a compromise with Greece and changed its name. Kosovo is in a similar situation: it has fulfilled the conditions required to lift the visa regime with the Schengen Area, but the EU, regardless of this, chose not to approve this move. Furthermore, based on the European Commission's opinion, North Macedonia is definitely more advanced in the process of implementing the reforms required by the EU than the countries which are already negotiating their accession: Serbia and Montenegro.
- Blocking the accession talks also entails raising the question as to how the EU wants to influence neighbouring countries and encourage them to conduct reforms, if this does not off the guarantee of enhancing integration. The lack of a positive decision will likely be used by such countries as Russia, China and Turkey, which have been making efforts to strengthen their position in the Balkans at the expense of the EU.