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Bulgaria blocks accession negotiations with North Macedonia

Marta Szpala, Mateusz Seroka

Due to objections from Bulgaria, the EU Council did not adopt the conclusions on the enlargement policy, including the negotiating framework with North Macedonia and Albania proposed by the European Commission (EC) in December this year. As a result, it was impossible to start accession talks this year and to hold the first EU-North Macedonia intergovernmental conference, which was one of the priorities of Germany's presidency of the EU Council.

Bulgaria accuses North Macedonia of sabotaging the provisions of the Treaty on Friendship, Good Neighbourly Relations and Co-operation signed in 2017. It has announced that it will support the negotiation framework on condition that a road map for implementing the provisions of the treaty is adopted as part of the accession process. From Sofia's perspective, the history of Macedonia is part of Bulgaria's own history, hence its protests against "falsifying and unduly claiming ownership of Bulgarian history" and demands that Macedonian school textbooks should be changed. It also insists that the full official name of the Republic of North Macedonia be used in the accession negotiations (instead of the shorter form North Macedonia) and that the term 'Macedonian language' be replaced by the term 'the official language of the candidate country'. Furthermore, it demands that Skopje should not take action to protect the interests of the Macedonian minority in Bulgaria. The government in Skopje has rejected the proposal to link the accession talks with resolving the disputes with Sofia. It argues that the treaty of 2017 either regulates most of these issues (e.g. the issue of minorities) or introduces mechanisms to resolve them (e.g. the joint committee for historical and educational issues). In its opinion, agreeing to Bulgaria's demands would mean renouncing Macedonian history, identity and language, which is unacceptable to a majority of the Macedonian public. The government rejects the demands to discontinue the use of the term 'Bulgarian fascist invader' (1941–1944) or recognise 1944 as a turning point giving rise to a separate Macedonian identity, amongst other issues. Macedonia does not question the need to continue the work of the joint committee and to revise the content of the textbooks, but it emphasises that these areas of activity should not be associated with the accession process.

Even though all the technical demands have been met and positive recommendations have been received on a regular basis from the European Commission since 2009, Skopje is still unable to get the accession negotiations on track. Before 2018, this process had been obstructed above all by Athens, until the Greek-Macedonian deal was struck which envisaged changing the country's name to North Macedonia. Then France made its support

for the continuation of the enlargement policy dependent on reforming the methodology of the accession negotiations, which took place in 2020.

Commentary

- The Bulgarian government led by Boyko Borisov, the leader of the Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) party, has decided to escalate the dispute for internal political reasons. Anti-government protests have been ongoing in the country since July this year, and the support levels for GERB and its coalition partner, the nationalist United Patriots alliance, have been on the decline, and it is likely to lose the parliamentary elections scheduled for March 2021. Borisov has used the dispute with Skopje as an instrument to regain public support, and the belief (widely shared among the Bulgarian public and elites) that the Macedonian people have Bulgarian roots is helping him. For Sofia, this is also an opportunity to demonstrate its assertiveness in its contacts with EU institutions and the largest member states. The government's actions with regard to Skopje have been backed by all the political forces in parliament, with the exception of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, which represents the Turkish minority.
- Most European Union member states do not understand Sofia's demands or its desire to block the progress of the enlargement policy, which it used to advocate. Bulgaria has wiped out its previous efforts to build an image of a state promoting the interests of the Western Balkan countries in the EU. The Bulgarian blockade will also adversely affect Sofia's relations with Germany and the United States. Both these countries want the negotiations with Skopje to kick off, in order to ensure stability in North Macedonia and strengthen the pro-Western orientation of the entire region.
- Unless the current dispute between Sofia and Skopje is resolved in the coming weeks, the blockade of accession negotiations with North Macedonia may drag on for months. The countries that will take over the presidency of the EU Council after Germany will not be as interested in enlargement (Portugal) or will have much less influence (Slovenia) to work out a compromise between Bulgaria and North Macedonia or to maintain the support of other member states for continuing the enlargement policy. However, the chances of a compromise between the two countries are slim. The arrogant rhetoric adopted by representatives of the Bulgarian government coalition has outraged the Macedonian public and has made the government in Skopje less willing to make concessions. The North Macedonian leaders are also concerned that accepting Bulgaria's demands at an early stage of the negotiations with the EU will encourage it to make more extensive demands. The US and the EU would have to work together to press Prime Minister Borisov to make Sofia change its mind, but even this may prove insufficient, as the election campaign in Bulgaria will contribute to the escalating anti-Macedonian rhetoric.
- Sofia's decision to block North Macedonia's European integration will adversely affect the effectiveness and credibility of the EU's policy in the Balkans and weaken the EU's influence in the region. This will also strengthen the belief shared by the Balkan governments and public that the accession process is non-transparent and the requirements set by the community are arbitrary. Support for EU integration has fallen by

around 8 percentage points in North Macedonia in recent months, while alternative forms of co-operation (e.g. the Eurasian Union) have become more popular. A failure for Skopje will additionally discourage the ruling elites in other countries in the region from implementing reforms and making socially unpopular decisions. It will prove that, even if the EU's requirements and expectations are met, progress towards integration will remain uncertain. In turn, Bulgaria's recent moves will be used by some countries in discussions within the EU as an argument for replacing the unanimity principle by qualified majority voting in order to maintain the effectiveness of, for example, the EU's enlargement policy.

- Sofia's demands to include issues relating to bilateral disputes which touch such sensitive areas as ethnic identity, linguistic issues and the interpretation of history in the negotiating framework set a dangerous precedent in the enlargement process. Although there have been some cases when EU member states blocked the accession of Balkan countries due to bilateral issues in the previous decade, attempts were made to make the resolution of these questions part of the negotiation process. Candidate countries may fear that they will be forced to resolve historical disputes with the countries that already belong to the EU as a condition for their integration with the EU. For example, opponents of the pro-Western orientation in Serbia and Bosnia & Herzegovina could exploit this approach in the context of these countries' relations with Croatia.