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Keeping your word

The EU should initiate accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania – because they are no guarantee of membership

Read this article in German.

The European Union should have every reason to celebrate these days: North Macedonia and Albania are motivated enough by the prospect of EU accession talks to implement extensive and, in some cases, painful reforms. In the case of North Macedonia, the government and the parliament have even changed the country's name, bringing to an end a nearly 30-year conflict with Greece. Young people in both countries are overwhelmingly in favour of EU membership – 95 per cent in Albania and 81 per cent in North Macedonia. The vast majority of them identify with Europe.

In other words, the EU could be proud of its attractiveness and the degree to which it can shape the political process in these countries. It could adopt an optimistic and self-confident approach to the imminent accession talks: if it can achieve this much before negotiations even begin, what could it achieve when actual EU accession is on the cards?

But instead, some EU member states and the Conservatives (CDU/CSU) in the German Bundestag find it difficult to open up the path for accession talks. In June, the EU Council even postponed the decision to October 2019. This not only goes against its own statements in mid-2018. It also goes against the European Commission. That's particularly regrettable when it comes to North Macedonia. The hesitation damages the EU as well as the future prospects of both accession candidates.

Granted, North Macedonia and, in particular, Albania have a long and difficult journey ahead before they can successfully join the EU, not least when it comes to strengthening democracy and the rule of law as well as combating corruption and organised crime. All of the Balkan states are subject to the temptation of authoritarian regimes. That's why it's important to strengthen the role of parliaments and their control

functions. The phenomenon of parliamentary boycott needs to end, with EU involvement if necessary, and a unilateral veto by the boycotting parties needs to be avoided.

Five reasons for opening accession talks

The forthcoming decision is specifically not about EU accession, but about the initiation of accession talks. This is a big difference. But the recent debate has mixed both to such an extent that one might assume it was intentional. There are at least five reasons why the initiation of accession talks is extremely important right now:

First, The EU's ability to influence events in these countries is not without limitations. It depends on whether the EU and its member states can keep their word as credible and reliable partners. This goes back to 2003, when the Thessaloniki European Council opened up the prospect of accession for the Western Balkan nations.

Second, accession talks give the EU legitimacy and additional instruments for influencing developments in the respective nations to an even greater extent to prepare them for potential accession.

Third, the EU provides the population with specific prospects for the future. At present, because of the perceived lack of prospects at home, many young people are acting according to the motto: 'If the EU doesn't come to us, we'll go to the EU.'

One thing is clear: If North Macedonia and Albania are to join the EU following a long accession process, they will be significantly different countries.

Forth, accession talks allow the EU to support pro-European forces in the candidate nations by sending out a clear signal to the respective governments that political reforms and movements are worth the effort.

Last but not least, if the EU and its member states fail to open the way for accession talks in the near future, despite the considerable progress made in North Macedonia in particular, there would be a risk of growing instability. In this case, it would come as no surprise if the population and the government ended up turning their back on the EU and looking to China and Russia instead.

The EU's credibility is on the line

However, accession talks are not a foregone conclusion. It's important not to give the impression that accession talks automatically result in accession. After all, this would adversely affect acceptance in Germany and other EU member states, as well as the willingness to make specific changes locally.

The EU needs to define strict requirements and ensure that these are applied and examined accordingly. Key areas like democracy and the rule of law should be given priority and need to enjoy a central position on the accession agenda right from the start. This requires political leadership and presence on the part of the EU as well as the governments and parliaments of the EU member states. And if some achievements would be questioned, it should be possible to suspend or, in the worst case, even stop the accession talks. One thing is clear: If North Macedonia and Albania are to join the EU following a long accession process, they will be significantly different countries.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel has made a number of correct decisions with regard to the Western Balkan nations in recent months and years. Her visit to Skopje last year, just a few days before the Macedonian referendum on the naming dispute, was interpreted as a clear signal. Now she needs to persuade the sceptics in her own ranks and in the EU that it's worth laying the groundwork for North Macedonia and Albania to enter accession talks – as otherwise the EU would risk losing its credibility in both countries. And, in this case, the EU's capacity to make a global political impact wouldn't even be worth mentioning.



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