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A turning point for EU integration?

After many years of stalling, the EU could revamp its integration process in the western Balkans and send a clear signal toward Russia and China

A potential candidate status for Ukraine's and Moldova's accession to the European Union could also reignite hope for the acceleration of the halted process of European integration of a region that Brussels has forgotten – the Western Balkans.

Currently, there are four candidate countries from the region – Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Albania – and two hopeful potential candidates – Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina – yet to be granted such status.

Of the six small countries, only Serbia and Montenegro began the negotiation process – in 2014 and 2012, respectively. However, little progress has been made since, and the two countries are still nowhere near completing the EU accession process.

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With the war in Ukraine changing how we perceive global alliances and their meaning for smaller countries, it has ignited a debate on whether these developments will lead to a new European order or a new Cold War. The global context of this crisis also highlights the need for exploring more creative, more engaged, and strategic responses to international diplomacy. Recently, three of the Western Balkan countries – Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia – also voiced their support for Ukraine becoming a EU member while also maintaining their own path towards the Union.

Bumpy road toward EU integration

After negotiating for eight years, Serbia has opened 18 chapters out of 35

in total, provisionally closing only two. While neighbouring Montenegro has opened all of the chapters, it lacks progress in crucial chapters such as Chapter 23, which covers the judiciary, and Chapter 24, which covers the fight against organised crime and corruption.

North Macedonia's European journey has been even more painful and obstacles-ridden. A candidate country since 2005, the former Yugoslav country had to endure years of being vetoed by its much larger southern neighbour Greece over a naming dispute, which also had a geographical region called 'Macedonia', that lasted close to three decades.

After the dispute with Greece was resolved in 2019, and the country changed its name to North Macedonia to mark a geographic and historic distinction, Skopje seemed set to continue its European endeavour.

However, in the second half of 2019, it was France that voiced objections to how the overall negotiation process was being done. Citing a need for a 'reformed enlargement process,' Paris blocked both North Macedonia and Albania, a candidate country since 2014, from beginning the much-anticipated talks to join the EU.

While a revamped enlargement plan the following year seemed to satisfy Paris' needs and finally set both North Macedonia and Albania on the right track to begin the accession talks, disaster struck again. This time, another one of North Macedonia's neighbours, Bulgaria, brought its own bilateral dispute into the mix. The two countries signed a so-called 'Friendship Treaty' in 2017, which also implied that Sofia wouldn't impede Skopje's European integration.

Bulgaria claims that the Macedonian language isn't a separate language at all, but is in fact a regional language of the Bulgarian language, and that the two countries also share a 'common history', something which Skopje denies.

However, this didn't stop Bulgaria from blocking the process for the last two years over what it perceives as a 'history and identity dispute' with its much smaller neighbour. Bulgaria claims that the Macedonian language isn't a separate language at all, but is in fact a regional language of the Bulgarian language, and that the two countries also share a 'common history', something which Skopje denies.

This resulted in a stalling of the process again, and putting North Macedonia and Albania on the side-lines, agonisingly waiting once more for the green light to start negotiation talks with the EU.

Aside from the historical dispute, Bulgaria also wants North Macedonia to open up its constitution and include Bulgarians in it, as well as to find a way of halting the hate speech against the Bulgarian community in the country. According to Bulgarian authorities the inclusion of the Bulgarian community in the constitution would guarantee the same rights as other ethnic minorities have in the country.

A perspective for economic development and democratisation

While, at the moment, Skopje and Sofia are still far from finding a solution for the dispute, there have been efforts made by France which would put the Bulgarian demands into North Macedonia's EU negotiation framework and, in that way, bypass the current veto.

A possible solution for this dispute would also pave the way for the integration process in the Western Balkans to quicken, especially amid developments such as the war in Ukraine.

Remembering how Russia and China already made their presence in the Balkans felt during the Covid-19 crisis when they managed to supply these countries with Covid-19 vaccines before the EU could.

Half of the Western Balkans six (North Macedonia, Albania, and Montenegro) are already part of NATO and, therefore, could become a potential thorn in Russia's eye. An accelerated EU membership would undoubtedly give them the much-needed assurances for their future.

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It is also important to keep in mind the post-communist transition that has taken a toll on the economies of each of these countries in the last 30 years. By finally having a clear European perspective, something which has been lacking in the previous decade, they can offer their citizens something more tangible than the promises made by various domestic political elites.

It is here that the EU could offer the West-Balkan countries something that Russia or China can't – a perspective for economic development and democratisation of their societies.

Having a clear commitment from Brussels on their European integration would send a message to the likes of Russia and China, who are seeking to have more significant influence in the region – the EU is ready to stand and support its allies no matter their size and that they can't be bullied anymore by those that are bigger and 'supposedly' stronger.



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