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How the EU's inaction in the Western Balkans backfires

Brussels' broken promises are weakening the progressive camp in South-Eastern Europe — for the benefit of nationalist and autocratic forces

North Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev announced his surprise resignation on 31 October. He also stepped down as chair of the social democratic party SDSM. Zaev's move came after the second round of local elections, which saw his party suffer significant losses: more than half of municipalities they previously governed were won by the opposition.

But why would a prime minister really allow his political fate to depend on the outcome of a local election – specifically, the mayoral election in the capital Skopje? There's more to the resignation than meets the eye. Zaev had dedicated his political work to European integration. But he has been bitterly disappointed with the lack of progress.

Zaev and his Greek counterpart Alexis Tsipras gained international recognition by settling the dispute with Greece over the official name of now-North Macedonia in 2019, which had plagued the countries for decades. But even three years after the Prespa Agreement, which laid the foundation for normalising relations between Greece and North Macedonia, Zaev's government failed to reap the benefits of the sweeping concessions, not least the change to the country's name. The long-awaited start of official EU accession talks has been blocked by Bulgaria for about a year, with no prospect of an agreement being reached any time soon.

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With the process to join the EU having stalled, Zaev's pro-European government has lost vital clout after its show of political strength in recent years. The progressive government prioritised accession negotiations from the outset. The fact that many voters expressed their disappointed in the social democrats

during the local elections is therefore largely because of its lack of success on the key issue of EU rapprochement. And the impression remains that the wrong person resigned.

The failure of EU enlargement

Zaev's move is ultimately the result of failed delaying tactics in Brussels, effectively paralysing EU enlargement policy in South-Eastern Europe over several years. The current situation exposes three problems caused by the inaction of EU heads of state and government.

Firstly, the EU has a credibility problem. The underlying principle of EU enlargement is simple: reforms must be made to increase the prospect of accession. The problem is that the EU is no longer holding up its end of the bargain. As the example of North Macedonia shows, there is no longer a consensus within the EU for the tried-and-tested formula: progress on accession in exchange for reform.

After France, the Netherlands, and Denmark initially opposed accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia, Zaev called fresh elections at the end of 2019 to secure his political mandate, winning by a narrow margin. Even then, it should have been clear how fragile the political legitimacy was for further reform in North Macedonia. France's opposition was successfully overcome. But shortly afterward came a new veto – this time from Bulgaria, claiming that the Macedonian language is merely a dialect of Bulgarian.

A range of reforms are required from EU candidate countries to bring them in line with the union's values, legislation, and standards. In North Macedonia's case, the country even changed its name under the Prespa Agreement, despite protests from the opposition party VMRO. The conservative-nationalist party accused Zaev of making substantial concessions only to be strung along by the EU. The VMRO made huge gains in the local elections, a punishment for Zaev selling out national interests, as an VMRO official declared.

Secondly, all this is a recurring problem with enlargement policy. The EU's current approach only benefits the wrong kind. Those who drive reform are not rewarded for their efforts — and put under heavy pressure instead. Increasingly autocratic regimes such as Alexander Vucic's in Serbia, are pandered to by Macron, Merkel, and von der Leyen. This policy punishes progressives and plays into the hands of autocratic nationalists. The stalemate and lack of prospects only make this social polarisation worse and allow demagogues to garner more support by

playing on lines of religious and ethnic conflict.

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Thirdly, these developments reveal a strategic error by western EU member states in particular. The EU's approach, which people in the Balkans consider deeply unfair, is thwarting popularity for the European project, making Russia and others seem an attractive alternative to European regulatory power because they offer rapid cooperation without the lengthy process.

The vaccine rollout last year is a prime example: Russia delivered its own Sputnik vaccine to Serbia early on. Many North Macedonians, then, leveraged their family connections in Serbia to get hold of some jabs. These kinds of experiences are typical in the country.

Ultimately, it's no use for EU institutions to produce all these infographics explaining how much more substantial aid has been provided, if it can't actually be obtained. Governments and people in the Western Balkans are measuring the EU on specific commitments addressing their core concerns. In Kosovo, this relates to the promised end to a visa requirement, while in Albania and North Macedonia, it involves initiating official accession talks. Anything short of this is nothing more than a consolation prize.

The perspective of EU integration is losing its appeal in the region, not because of Moscow making a more appealing offer, but because people increasingly see joining the EU as nothing more than a pipedream. As the latest rhetoric from President Dodik in Bosnia-Herzegovina on the Republika Srpska's secession shows: Brussels' delaying tactics are a dangerous game.

What consequences will this have for the European project?

From a regulatory point of view, the Western Balkans were once a flagship project for the EU. Conflicts could be eased, if not resolved, at least in view of the prospect of a promising shared future. A change of strategy is not even needed, only the political will to implement decisions that have already been made.

To resolve the situation, however, Bulgaria's veto must first be lifted. This is not about finding new incentives for Bulgaria or responding to

Sofia's legitimate concerns. It's about the credibility of the EU itself, about sticking to promises. The European Council must reach an agreement among its members.

The policy as it stands does nothing for a capable, sovereign Europe that acts independently of other major powers or regional leaders. Nowhere else could such an ambition be achieved using so little funds as in the Western Balkans. If Europe continues to choose the path of indecision, someone else will fill the void. It's time to wake up.



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