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The long road to Brussels

The EU will finally start accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania. But Covid-19 may thwart quick progress

In October 2019, two nations were breathing in the same rhythm, expecting the EU leader's decision to start EU accession negotiations for North Macedonia and Albania. It did not happen back then. The good news only came on 24 March 2020, while everyone is holding their breath wondering whether we have enough respirators for the patients affected by Covid-19. The celebration remained just an event on the calendar, though people shared their joy on social media.

After many years of expecting these news after having received candidate status, it was almost like a miracle when North Macedonia and Albania broke the path to the EU. In the midst of this corona crisis when the situation is extremely difficult in many member states, the EU had managed to keep the agenda going.

'It is unfortunate that we cannot shake hands, congratulate each other on this, [...] but these days will remain as one of the two brightest days in Macedonian history', said North Macedonia's Minister for European Affairs Bujar Osmani. 'The door of the waiting room of the European Union house was finally opened, in a cursed time, when the doors of all our houses are closed, ' said Albanian Prime Minister Rama in equally historic terms. 'Albania has entered a new phase of its history, right in the middle of a world war that no one knows when it will end.'

Zoran Zaev, former Prime Minister and leader of SDSM, also praised the move. It was him, as prime minister, who signed the Prespa Agreement with neighbouring Greece to add the geographical designation 'North' to his country's name, as well as signing the Agreement on Good Neighborliness with Bulgaria, which paved the road to NATO membership and potential EU entry. However, it was the failure of the EU to come to a decision in October last year that led to his resignation and early elections in North Macedonia. They were set to take place on 12 April this year, but have been postponed because of the corona crisis. Probably, they will take place by the end of 2020.

Conditions to be met

Hristijan Mickoski, leader of the opposition VMRO DPMNE, called the decision a historic half-step because there is no specific date for the intergovernmental conference that will officially kick off the accession talks. 'But if you ask me if this agreement had to happen, with such content, I would say no', Mickoski said. He has repeatedly announced his intention to reconsider the Prespa Agreement, also stating that he does not agree with Brussels' latest progress report on North Macedonia.

Still, he promises that, after the upcoming elections, his political party will bring the country into the EU on a fast track – although he never explained how he would do it without respecting the Prespa Agreement. In light of the global pandemic even a campaigning Hristijan Mickoski should realise that a specific date cannot be set at the moment, his political opponents are able to stop bilateral disputes, but not pandemics. The Prespa Agreement with Greece had to be reached because it was a cause for vetoing accession negotiations.

While the Prespa Agreement is clearly still used to gain political leeway, there is no point of going back, as the country's interim Prime Minister Spasovski put it: 'We have reached the point where it is clear that our perspective is in the EU.'

Over the course of opening and closing chapters during accession negotiations, we can hope that the pandemic has finally stopped by then, that the movement restrictions have lifted and that the people in North Macedonia and Albania can celebrate.

Unlike North Macedonia, Albania has received a list of conditions that must be met before de facto opening negotiations. There is a list of 15 conditions compiled by a few member states of European Council. The conditions are about the rule of law, the concrete results in fighting against organised crime and corruption, new electoral reform, justice reform and the revision of the much-discussed draft law on the media.

'It is now essential for the country to unite and implement these measures', says EU Ambassador to Tirana Luigi Soreca. 'It is mainly up to the government to take action and immediately prepare a structured action plan for the coming months. But this work is an effort of the whole society, which will need the cooperation of all institutions, the opposition and civil society.' But civil society actors think the country has not changed much since the last meeting of the European Council in

October 2019.

The celebrations are postponed

The decision had two positive effects – Albania's prospects were confirmed and hopes were raised that governance would be better monitored. However, the list of homework for Albania is long and the tasks are not just addressed to the government. An opposition consensus is needed to carry out electoral reform.

30 years ago in December 1990, Albanian students began a protest to overthrow the communist regime with the slogan: 'We want Albania like all of Europe'. The decision to open negotiations with Albania is an important milestone on Tirana's road to Brussels. The question that no one has the answer to today is: how long will it take Albania to become a member of the EU? 'Not a single minute should be lost to implement as soon as possible each of the conditions that precede the intergovernmental conference for the start of the negotiation of chapters', the President of the Republic Ilir Meta wrote on Twitter. But at the moment no one is talking about starting the homework: all the energy is focused on coping with the coronavirus pandemic.

For North Macedonia on the other hand, it remains to be seen whether the high percentage of young people in the country who say that they see their future in the EU will now see it through their own state, North Macedonia. For a country that experienced many disappointments, the prospect is now clear. In a recent NDI poll, more than 80 per cent of citizens believe in the EU and NATO.

Over the course of opening and closing chapters during accession negotiations, we hope that the pandemic has finally stopped by then, that the movement restrictions have lifted and that the people in North Macedonia and Albania can celebrate. And this time not just on social media, but outside, cheerfully and full of hope for the European future perspective, as they would have liked to do in March.



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