EUROPEAN INTEGRATION 27.06.2022 | Max Brändle

The Western Balkans' warning sign to Ukraine

Ukraine and Moldova are candidates to join the EU. But the years-long standstill in the Western Balkans shows how the process can lead to frustration

Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova are now officially candidates for accession to the European Union. The prospect of accession is intended to send a signal of solidarity and support, especially towards Kyiv. Still, what does this kind of promise mean for the country that is currently bravely defending itself against Russia's invasion? What rocky road now lies ahead for Ukraine (and Moldova)? To edge closer to an answer, it is worth looking at the states of the Western Balkans, which have been struggling with hope and frustration for accession since two decades.

Montenegro and Serbia have been negotiating for about a decade. But they have not yet achieved a breakthrough on core issues of the accession process, such as the rule of law and the fight against corruption. Northern Macedonia and Albania have fulfilled all the preconditions for the start of accession negotiations. But because of EU member state Bulgaria's veto on the basis of identity politics, there has been no tangible progress. The EU summit on 23 June was unable to break this deadlock. Meanwhile, Bosnia-Herzegovina has to fulfil further conditions for candidate status, and Kosovo is struggling with the fact that five EU member states still do not recognise the country's independence. Moreover, it is the only Balkan country that still needs visas to enter the EU, despite having fulfilled all the conditions for visa liberalisation.

Balancing the need for reform and a speedy procedure

There is no question that all Western Balkan countries belong to Europe and should one day become fully-fledged members of the European Union. But,undoubtedly, all these states still need to make reforms, not least in the fight against corruption, organised crime, the rule of law, freedom of the media, and in many other areas. Addressing these

problems is in the interest of the people and the sustainability of the communities in these countries. The EU accession process offers a clear roadmap, external pressure – which is essential – as well as resources and support for the reform process. At the same time, the goals of these reform efforts are often at odds with the personal interests of the countries' political elites that are supposed to bring about these changes. They would dry up their sources of power and income.

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Among political advisors and leaders, there is a lively debate on how to make the EU accession process more effective in order to actually deliver the desired results and not just produce stagnation and frustration. Some choose a pragmatic approach in this debate: one should concentrate on what actually works, and that is economic cooperation. By reducing trade barriers, closer integration into EU value chains, foreign investment in the Balkans, jobs and prosperity, gradual integration into the European Union can work. However, this will only be successful if there is legal certainty and a functioning administration. Full membership remains the long-term goal.

However, difficult areas such as the settlement of regional conflicts, democratic participation, and freedom of the media as well as political co-determination in the European Union must be put on the back burner for the time being. Progress can be made, nevertheless, by taking intermediate steps that already provide greater advantages on the path towards the ultimate goal. For example, candidates could be given early access to the powerful EU structural funds to catch up more quickly with member states.

'Back to basics'

Others suggest that the political dimension of enlargement can be created through a new geopolitical framework. EU Council President Charles Michel and French President Emmanuel Macron, for example, have put forward different variations of a geopolitical community that, regardless of membership in the European Union, should send a clear signal of togetherness in times of escalating geopolitical conflicts. This community should also be open to the states of the Western Balkans as well as Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. However, this should not present an alternative to full membership in the European Union.

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Finally, others again call for the EU to return to its principles: 'back to basics'. The Copenhagen criteria set standards of democracy, human rights, and market economy as prerequisites for the EU accession process. Only a return to these founding principles could give the EU accession process the transformative power it needs to demand drastic reforms in the candidate countries. At the same time, such a return to the foundations of the European Union must also guide the internal reform process to make the European Union's aura shine again.

Certainly, no progress will be possible without healthy pragmatism. But the profound conflicts between a partly kleptocratic elite and the reform aspirations of the EU accession process cannot be resolved with common sense alone. The vague formulations of a geopolitical community that circulated in the run-up to the recent EU summit were unable to inspire the deliberations of the heads of state and government. Evidently, more substantial and resilient alliances and rules are needed. The return to the foundations of the EU – inevitable as it is – must not, however, lead to a situation where the states in our neighbourhood languish in the eternal waiting room because they do not meet the noble demands which – to be frank – not even all member states can meet .

Democratising societies

One key to resolving this difficult situation in the EU accession process lies in the democratisation of societies. Only if support for EU membership and the necessary reforms can be won among the population of the countries concerned, then the internal pressure can be built up to overcome the blockades. To achieve this, political partners are important who promote this accession process, explain the advantages of membership and defend the necessary efforts.

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The democratisation of society goes far beyond the steps envisaged in the EU accession process and includes, for example, co-determination in the workplace and trade unions. Too often, the European Union has relied on forces that have promised to fight corruption in their countries and to replace the old elites, only to then advance to the riches of power themselves.

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To ensure that the prospect of accession for Ukraine does not become – as in the Western Balkans – a cipher for frustration and disappointment, we need partners in countries that not only promise stability and control, but also share our values and follow them in action. Of course, this applies not only to the group of countries in the EU integration process, which has now grown to nine, but also to those who block progress within the EU.



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