



Reimagining European enlargement: A new way forward?

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The 2019 European Council conclusions stated that member states are fully committed towards the enlargement of the Western Balkans with special regards to North Macedonia and Albania and to make a decisive decision by October 2019. In 2020 the EU faces new challenges in its southern neighborhood where it needs to strengthen its political, economic and security commitments. Therefore the European Commission released a revised enlargement methodology which means the two candidate countries will need to adapt to new measures. At the same time the enlargement process includes reversible effects to which can change the appetite for joining the European club. The new Hungarian Commissioner for Enlargement was ambitious in setting concrete goals, while also pushing member states towards greater support. Hungary has been providing assistance regarding the implementation for reforms in the form of „integration experts” who work closely with the host country’s government. For Hungary, the Western Balkans enlargement is not only of economic importance, but also holds implications geopolitically, security-wise including minority rights. Overall, a successful strategy can strengthen competitiveness not only on a regional, but EU-wide level.

The birth of a more credible, dynamic, predictable and political EU accession process

While the European Council conclusions of last June call for a more robust enlargement policy vis-à-vis the Western Balkans, the concerns of France have halted the opening of accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania. The Macedonian leadership made great commitments towards deeper European integration by changing the country’s name -thus changing its own identity- to North Macedonia. The constitutional change known as the Prespa Agreement was first symbolically ratified by Greece bringing the country closer to European economic and political integration. Nevertheless, the two candidate countries are still in the waiting room despite the efforts made. Out of the 27 EU members, France raised concerns pushing for a more credible, goal-oriented and pragmatic enlargement process. The new proposal laid down by the new Commissioner for Enlargement, Mr. Várhelyi titled: „*A more credible, dynamic, predictable and political EU accession process*” made the process more flexible, reversible with a possibility to speed up accession talks than before. This means that countries striving for accession can also have certain access to EU funds and be part of common EU projects which can facilitate their integration into the Union. On the other hand, the opening of chapters can be halted in case of a fallback in reforms. This way the process can be slowed down or accelerated,

which resembles the “carrots and sticks” policy the EU often uses towards its external partners.

Western Balkans from a Hungarian perspective

The EU can only make integration successful if it involves EU member states who have first-hand experience from EU accession such as the vigorous adoption of the *acquis communautaire*. From Hungary’s perspective the Western Balkans integration is not purely of economic importance. The connection of the countries involves a wide range of important issues from a security perspective, involving tackling illegal migration, protecting the rights of national minorities and cooperating in the EU’s external border management, as well as developing exports and financing green investment projects.¹ With over 15 years of EU membership and a great knowledge of EU institutions and decision-making process Hungary can make use of its past experience as a regional actor for enhanced integration. In practice, the country provides integration experts to several countries in the region, including Montenegro, Albania or North Macedonia. The closer relationship will gain momentum, as the United Kingdom leaves the European Union in such uncertain times. The focus is now shifting towards Central Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans. While the Instrument for Pre-Accession III as part of the multiannual financial framework will continue to be vital for those seeking EU accession, the support of regional actors with the historical experience of new member states will be capable in building a direct social, cultural, economic and mobility link which can serve as a pragmatic example. For example, the Via Carpatia moving from the Baltic states via the Visegrad countries down to Greece can serve as a new example for a possible EU-Western Balkans highway and transport corridor.

Overall, as the Commission presented a positive progress report for Albania and North Macedonia, which can provide a strong incentive for all members of the European Council to fully endorse the beginning of accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania by the end of this year. This will not only give a boost to counter enlargement fatigue, but also increase regional and overall EU competitiveness creating a stronger and more committed partnership with neighboring countries and increasing the overall security of our Union.

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¹ The Hungarian government has set up the Western Balkans Green Center in order to support the green transition of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia which will transform into a regional multi-donor fund by 2021.