

IN THE EU WAITING ROOM: EXPLORING THE WESTERN BALKAN'S ROAD TO INTEGRATION

ARTICLE

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Being in the waiting room means that not much is new and not much is happening. However, from time to time, the door of the one you are waiting for opens, offering you a glimpse of the promise that lies inside. At other times, a new visitor may come in who has an urgent appointment, while you keep hoping that the entry of the visitor reminds those who stand on the other side that there is someone waiting. This feels like an apt description of where the Western Balkans is at this point. Relatively stuck in the process of enlargement, with a new boost by the newcomers (Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia) and a new methodology for preparing the countries to join the Union, the waiting room analogy still holds.

However, while the countries of the Western Balkans have been in the waiting room, when the door has opened changes have taken place, some of which are significant. Indeed, those changes make the enlargement process, as it stands now, a process of high cost and key open questions.

The expansion of the enlargement process

If we consider the journey of enlargement today, we may conclude that things are in motion, particularly since the Russian aggression on Ukraine, and the subsequent response of the European Union (EU), which included a historic decision to give candidate status to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. However, if we take a more long *durée* approach to enlargement, and the individual journeys of the Western Balkan countries waiting to join, the picture becomes more obfuscated, and certainly less optimistic, or rather more cynical.

Let's look back and start at the height of the "enlargement fever" with the Thessaloniki promise in 2003, which came out with the bold statement (at the time, and in the post-war context of the violent breakup of Yugoslavia) that "The future of the Western Balkans is within the European Union". Coinciding with a democratising spirit of the countries of the Western Balkans and Turkey at the time, it seemed that the promise would become reality. Croatia and North Macedonia became candidate states soon thereafter, 2004 and 2005, respectively. However, these two countries have also become the two opposite polls showing the deterioration of the process of enlargement as such. Croatia has become the last successful case study, as it was the last country to join the Union in 2013, making it the last enlargement of the past decade. The Union has also lost one member since, the United Kingdom.

North Macedonia, on the other hand, has become the cautionary tale that one hears in all discussions and panels diagnosing enlargement. In the last two decades, the journey of the country has gone from the frontrunner to one of the most regressive states in terms of reforms and rule of law during the period of the government led by VMRO-DPMNE, to a revived hope after the change of the country's name in 2019, then to a limbo state after a French veto, and again due to a bilateral issue with Bulgaria (second veto) and regression in domestic reforms. North Macedonia has become a cautionary tale because it took a large political and social gamble in agreeing with Greece to change its name, so that it may advance in its Euro-Atlantic ambitions of joining the EU and NATO, and the gamble did not entirely pay off (in time). This provides important lessons and insights into the enlargement process, which I will now explore further.

The EU as a domestic political factor

What often gets lost in the discussions on EU enlargement is how present the political narrative and the political imagination of the EU are in the countries of the Western Balkans. What makes developments in the EU particularly salient in the domestic context of the individual countries is precisely their intertwining with domestic politics in the public imagination of voters and in the realm of institutional reform.

When North Macedonia held a referendum to decide on the name change, the referendum question read *"Are you in favour of NATO and EU membership, and accepting the name agreement between the Republic of Macedonia and Greece?"* with the answers Yes/No. This is a loaded question that was posed this way in order to give more of a positive purpose to a hard choice for many citizens. As a voter in the referendum, filling in the form, I felt not that I was voting for the country's name change as much as I was voting with the hope of enabling a better future for the country.

The country got NATO membership but failed to secure the opening of accession negotiations, due to yet another bilateral issue with Bulgaria. The French "No" in the 2019 EU summit and the introduction of the bilateral issue with Bulgaria into the negotiating framework have fundamentally changed the enlargement process not only for North Macedonia, but removing the process from its own course. This has not been assuaged (yet) by the new methodology introduced in 2020.

The issue with the legitimisation of bilateral issues such as the one with Bulgaria is problematic because it involves the EU in areas that it should not be involved in, such as the revision of history books, which should be the discussion of historians rather than politicians. In a region rife with bilateral issues, the EU must be seen as an honest broker, and this has not been the case, even if we consider the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia.

An additional issue is that the two vetoes have contributed towards a fairly negative political view of the countries of the Western Balkans, not reflecting the fact that the countries of the EU and those of the Western Balkans at the end have a goal to be part of the same union. Elsewhere, I have explored the issue of the use of language in how some EU leaders speak of the Western Balkans, and here it is important to emphasise that regardless of the frictions of the process, neither side should lose sight of the fact that they are dealing with states, hopefully future member states, and as such there needs to be more equality and balance

in the debate, despite the inherent inequality of the member state and non-member state relationship.

Lastly, domestically for each of these countries a serious concern is that the lack of clarity in the process has led the discussion to not focus on the fundamental questions of joining the EU. While this condition of uncertainty has been to the benefit of local political parties as it has made it unnecessary (politically) to develop clearer policy agendas, it has also harmed the EU agenda in these countries as it becomes harder to win elections on a pro-EU agenda, particularly if it is not seen as fair or beneficial. It also means that domestically we step away from precisely the internal processes that are demanded by the EU enlargement process, which is social learning of institutions and a deeper understanding of what an EU future truly entails for these countries. This is a debate that none of the countries of the Western Balkans have begun to have.

EU as a civic partner

If we further take down the level of analysis from institutions to citizens, another facet of the EU's presence in the region becomes apparent. Due to the EU's role in the reform processes in the area of democratisation and rule of law in the respective countries, it also is seen as a partner by civil society organizations (CSOs) and progressive actors.

The perceived role of the EU has been evident in many protests in the region throughout the years, where activists have called on it to react to the various injustices that they would protest about, including abuse of power, democratic backsliding, environmental endangerment, and so on. However, even the enthusiasm of the pro-EU, and essentially pro-reform, activists has abated due to the loss of legitimacy of the process itself. This does not mean that support for accession has decreased among these actors, but certainly there has been a need to recalibrate the vision of these organisations as it became less clear whether enlargement remains in the future cards for these countries. This aspect truly impresses the importance of a more resolute EU agenda on membership.

Where to from here?

The extension of candidate status to Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and Bosnia and Herzegovina has given a temporary boost to enlargement, which must be capitalised on. The countries of the Western Balkans, in the waiting room for a long time, have seen this as an opportunity to enter "in the room where it happens". Recently, Tirana hosted a few summits, the latest of which was a Ukraine-Southeast Europe summit where leaders of the Western Balkans signed bilateral declarations with President Zelensky on the Euro-Atlantic integration of Ukraine on 28 February. The next day, several of the countries of the Western Balkans met again to discuss their development, within the framework of the EU growth plan, which was introduced in November 2023 by the European Commission, seemingly to establish some sort of a united front in their approach to the EU.

The EU should also respond with a more united front vis-à-vis enlargement, with a clear vision, particularly after the EU elections this coming June. Thus far, after the proposal of the new methodology, there have been many proposals and ideas floated around, including the European Political Community, the staged accession, and others, as well as initiatives that have mostly added

confusion among citizens leading with the question “are these alternatives to actual membership?”. While this opening of avenues for the consideration of new options is encouraging, it still has not provided the security of a firm process. In order for the enlargement to regain its status as a process (which it arguably lost in 2019), there needs to be fairness and a clear path towards membership. On the side of the Western Balkans, there needs to finally be better cooperation between the countries (there are certainly enough initiatives to enable this), and serious reforms on the path towards democratisation and rule of law, which would need to come before any membership prospect.