



EU Enlargement Talks Stalled by COVID-19

By Nathan Crist

Last year, French President Emmanuel Macron shocked his European Union counterparts by vetoing the start of EU accession talks for North Macedonia and Albania. It was a bitter pill to swallow; both countries have been waiting for over a decade since applying for EU membership to proceed to negotiations over the 35 chapters of the *acquis*.¹

Fortunately for the two Balkan countries, on March 23 this year, the Council of the European Union put them back on the path to EU membership.² But by the time this good news came out of Brussels, all attention in North Macedonia and Albania was focused on managing the coronavirus lockdown.³ So just how did COVID-19 complicate this otherwise momentary setback for North Macedonia and Albania?

Macron makes waves

French President Emmanuel Macron justified his veto with a demand for changes to the accession process. The decision immediately sent ripples across the Balkans. North Macedonia's Prime Minister Zoran Zaev, who had staked his government on progress toward EU membership, chose to step down after the unexpected decision to delay his country's accession negotiations.

"We are still disappointed, angry and a little bit frustrated, because we got a promise from the European Union that when we deliver, they would deliver — and they failed," he said, referring to his government's delivery, along with Greece, of the historic Prespa agreement to adopt the name the Republic of North Macedonia.^{4,5}

After tempers cooled, the leaders of North Macedonia and Albania looked ahead to 2020 with cautious optimism. The incoming European Commission of Ursula von der Leyen expressed determination to move ahead with EU enlargement, and Croatia, taking over as President of the Council of the European Union for the first half of 2020, listed "the continuation of a credible and effective enlargement policy" as one of its priorities.⁶ But 2020 did not quite go as planned.

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A quick fix, complicated by COVID-19

Before the coronavirus forced Europe into lockdown, stalling accession negotiations for the foreseeable future, Brussels sent North Macedonia and Albania encouraging signals. Macron seemed to once again be on board after working with Brussels on the desired reform of the accession process. In early February, the Commission presented the revised blueprint for EU accession, placing more of the oversight of accession negotiations in the hands of EU member states.⁷ The blueprint also placed paramount importance on rule of law, making the alignment to EU standards in that area prerequisite for closing any other *acquis* chapter. With that out of the way, the Council of the European Union approved moving North Macedonia and Albania to the next stage of EU accession on March 23rd.⁸

However, by then attention in North Macedonia and Albania was already arrested by the coronavirus lockdown. This had a particularly negative knock-on effect in North Macedonia, where the pandemic forced the parliament to indefinitely postpone the April 12th snap elections, which were originally organized due to Prime Minister Zoran Zaev's resignation.⁹ Since Zaev's center-left coalition has only a narrow margin over an opposition party that is against the Prespa agreement and EU and NATO accession, this snap election is expected to be a serious test of the pro-EU direction of the country, whenever it occurs.

To top it all off, a much needed census in North Macedonia that was pushed back from April to make room for those snap elections is now up in the air. It may be 2021 before the headcount can occur, the first in North Macedonia since 2002. So even if the EU may finally be ready to bring North Macedonia into the bloc, oddly no one really knows how many people the EU will be adding. While the official population tally is just over 2 million, the real number could be around 1.5 million, as much as 25 percent lower due to emigration and a falling birth rate.¹⁰

EU enlargement eclipsed

The coronavirus has eclipsed EU enlargement, but it is certainly not standing in the way of Brussels engaging with the Western Balkans. Figuratively, coronavirus has permitted the EU to look at its Balkan neighbors without staring directly into the blinding glare of EU enlargement. When Croatia convened the EU Western Balkans Summit on May 6th, the agenda understandably focused on the collective response to the coronavirus, and not the awkward stops and starts of EU accession.

Aid totaling over 38 million euros was distributed in April to all six non-EU Western Balkan states for immediate medical needs, with another 374 million offered for economic

assistance.¹¹ At the EU Western Balkans Summit, the Council of the European Union announced that a further 3.3 billion would be mobilized to support the region as a whole with a future post-pandemic recovery.

Still, while the summit was a strong sign of the EU's commitment to the Western Balkans, the summit's declaration failed to make any direct mention of EU accession.¹² "The recommitment to the European perspective is welcome," remarked North Macedonian Foreign Minister Nikola Dimitrov. "We would have been even happier with a reference to enlargement or completion of the European Union. After all, the Council took a decision to start accession talks."¹³

Pandemic forces more patience

Before the coronavirus hit, leaders of North Macedonia and Albania were hopeful the summit would bring an announcement of an official date for the start of the accession negotiations, but for now managing the pandemic has taken precedence. Clearly, COVID-19 is proving to be a significant stumbling block on the road to accession. But Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama remains optimistic: "We're preparing all the setup for the negotiations and the date will come."¹⁴

Endnotes

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