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The Western Balkans in the European Political Community: another waiting room?

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On the 9th of May 2022, French President Macron spoke in front of the EU Parliament to pitch a new “European Political Community”, breathing new life into an initially failed idea of François Mitterand¹ to bring together democratic European nations. After a first meeting on October 6 in Prague, the European Council stated that the European Political Community (EPC) aims to strengthen Europe’s security, stability and prosperity and foster political dialogue and cooperation to address shared issues.²

With the accession of the Western Balkans or Ukraine still far out of sight, and in the wake of the Russian war against Ukraine, the initiative is said to allow the EU to engage more closely with the countries on the Union’s waiting list - such as the Western Balkans. Although a second summit is coming up this year, planned for spring 2023 in Moldova, observers still struggle to define what the EPC is or wants to be. What can Western Balkan nations expect to gain from this new initiative, the most recent in an already long list of initiatives that have sought to breathe new life into the accession process?

What does the EPC offer?

The Prague summit answers some questions but not all. Even after the leaders of the invited countries gathered, it remains unclear what the EPC actually has to offer. Several analysts see the EPC as an opportunity for the EU to strengthen political ties with the UK, after these have been weakened by Brexit. In addition, the EPC appeared as a potential platform for mediation between Azerbaijan and Armenia in the lingering conflict over Nagorno-Karabagh. In the fringes of the Prague summit, EU Council president Michel and Macron mediated talks between Azerbaijan president Ilham Aliyev and Armenia prime minister Nikol Pashinyan. The talks came as Armenia became increasingly critical of the Kremlin. With Russia’s influence in the conflict brought into question, the EPC could step up as a useful platform for dialogue.

Above all, however, the main purpose of the EPC in the short term seems to be to draw European nations into a more formal political sphere at a time of crisis. In the wake of the Russian war against Ukraine, countries such as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia are looking to strengthen their political ties with Europe, as they are not members of formal organisations such as NATO or the EU. These countries, said NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, are "facing pressure from Russia" amid Moscow's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine. As joining NATO is a lengthy and politically sensitive process, the more informal structure of the EPC can bypass this and still provide a degree of security.

This advantage of the EPC also applies also to the Western Balkans, according to the Community’s initiators. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz upon his arrival in Prague said “the EU will be able – through this format – to improve its relations with its neighbours wishing to

¹ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/european-political-community-successful-test>

² <https://czech-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/presidency/prague-summit/european-political-community/>

join.”³ The newly created format would allow the countries in the EU’s waiting room to already become more closely involved with the EU on their way to formal membership.

EU accession of the Western Balkans

And that way to membership has been long and difficult. To argue that the EU enlargement policy is a source of frustration in the Western Balkans is an understatement. Some of these countries have long-standing outstanding membership applications, and ambitions to become members of the European family tend to have been in place for a much longer time. There are currently four candidates negotiating with the European Union (EU): Albania and North Macedonia since July 2022, Serbia since July 2014, and Montenegro since July 2012 - for over 10 years. In order to conclude the negotiations (and join the EU), all chapters as set up by the European Commission need to be opened and subsequently closed. Among these 4 countries there are a total of 133 chapters to work on, of which so far only 51 were opened and only 5 have been provisionally closed⁴. It puts a number to the slow progress the Western Balkans are facing on the road to EU membership.

One reason for the slow progress is the lack of commitment from the EU itself. Western Balkan accession has often been on the agenda, but within the EU other priorities have taken precedence⁵. However, the geopolitical tensions caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the Kremlin's feared influence on domestic politics in the countries on the EU’s borders, have caused the EU to rethink its outlook on enlargement policy. In 2022, not only did negotiations start with Northern Macedonia and Albania, but Moldova and Ukraine were also granted candidate status by the European Council in June 2022, as was Bosnia and Herzegovina in December 2022. From the outside, there seems to have been more progress on European enlargement in the last four months than in the preceding 10 years as the Von der Leyen Commission - which had the ambition of becoming a “geopolitical Commission” – are showing a new and more determined approach to EU enlargement with the Western Balkans. The intentions, however, are questionable. That several countries have recently entered the next phase seems to be more of a smoke screen to conceal that, in actuality, there is an absence of determination on the part of the EU and its member states. In doing so, the EU is also politicising the accession, undermining the strategic character of the process, which creates even more unpredictable prospects for these countries.

However, no actual enlargement has taken place since Croatia's accession in 2013. On average, it takes a country 9 years to become part of the EU, with Malta and Cyprus having the longest procedures with roughly 14 years between their application submission and their official accession on 1 May 2004. To put this in perspective: North Macedonia has been in the process for 18 years, and then the negotiation phase - normally the longest part of the process - only

³ <https://visegradinsight.eu/the-european-political-community-gives-hope-to-the-western-balkans/>

⁴ Montenegro opened all its 33 chapters and provisionally closed 3. Serbia opened 18 of its 34 chapters and provisionally closed 2. North Macedonia and Albania are yet to open any of its 33 chapters since starting accession negotiations with the EU in July 2022.

⁵ In recent years: Eurozone crisis (2009- mid to late 2010s), Ukraine crisis (2014-2015), refugee crisis (2015-2016), COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2022) and Russian invasion in Ukraine (2022-ongoing). <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2022/06/20/what-has-stopped-eu-enlargement-in-western-balkans-pub-87348>

started in the summer of 2022.⁶ Before that, the Macedonian accession to the EU had long been frustrated by various blockades.⁷ The first hurdle came from Greece which requested a change to the country's name – which was resolved through the Prespa agreement in 2018 when Macedonia became North-Macedonia. Then, France called for the whole enlargement process to be reformed. Finally, Bulgaria demanded that North Macedonia amend its constitution to recognise an ethnic Bulgarian minority. Macedonian accession to the EU therefore remains dependent on Macedonian political parties reaching agreement on constitutional reforms. This seems far away, with the two largest parties diametrically opposed.

“Tragic optimism” about the EPC in the Western Balkans

It is therefore not surprising that disillusioned political leaders from the Western Balkan countries reacted with an understandable dose of scepticism to this latest addition to a long list of initiatives. Macedonian President Stevo Pendarovski, made his position clear that the European Political Community would be “welcome” but only as long as “it is not a substitute for membership.”⁸

Montenegrin President Milo Đukanović took the same stance: “Montenegro is interested in membership in the European Union, not in an alternative to membership, and will support everything, including the European Political Community, if this is a way to speed up the EU accession process,” stated Đukanović.⁹

While Albanian Prime Minister Rama called Macron’s initiative “visionary” and stressed a need to get together beyond the perimeter of the European Union, he also described his attitude to the EPC as “tragically optimistic”.¹⁰ He emphasised that the initiative should “not supplant the well-structured process of EU accession for candidate countries.” Additionally, Rama said he fears that the new political format could be “as much of an illusion for the most vulnerable states within that space, as all the previous efforts made before.”

Bosnia and Herzegovina was formally granted candidate status by the EU in December 2022. While this may seem to be a step ahead, it is in reality a purely symbolic milestone, as Bosnia and Herzegovina still has 14 criteria that it needs to make progress on before it can start actual negotiations – and its government currently seems to regress on those criteria. The development of a European Political community, it is feared, could further stall the Bosnian efforts to join the European Union. Paulo Rangel, the European Parliament’s Special Rapporteur for Bosnia and Herzegovina, expressed his concern that Bosnian aspirations to join the EU would lose fervor: “They could say ‘Ok, we already have something here, this is enough for us, we don't need more’”.¹¹ However, he simultaneously points out that it is important for Bosnia and Herzegovina and other candidates to have a “direct forum” which provides an opportunity for

⁶ Excluding countries with withdrawn (or frozen applications.

⁷ The blockades were lifted by the 2018 Prespa agreement (Greece) and the 2022 French Proposal (Bulgaria).

⁸ <https://pretsedatel.mk/en/panel-pariski-miroven-forum-11-11-2022-en/>

⁹ <https://n1info.rs/english/news/djukanovic-montenegro-supports-the-creation-of-european-political-community/>

¹⁰ <https://exit.al/en/albanian-pm-tragically-optimistic-over-european-political-community/>

¹¹ <https://ba.n1info.com/english/news/paulo-rangel-its-important-for-bih-to-be-part-of-european-political-community/>

non-EU countries to negotiate policies and develop ties with the EU, as this could also help bring them closer to making reforms and meeting the criteria for full membership.

Anticipating the concerns, the European Council emphasised that the EPC as a platform for political coordination “does not replace any existing organisation, structure or process, nor does it aim to create a new one at this stage.”¹² Similarly, Macron made it clear in his press conference that “for the Balkans, the path is already mapped out”, by which he meant membership.¹³

However, in the Western Balkans and beyond, Macron does not enjoy a reputation as a proponent of EU enlargement with the Western Balkans - quite the opposite. In 2018, even after North Macedonia made the sacrifice of changing its name with the Prespa agreement, France was not in favour of starting negotiations, with Macron insisting that the EU should concentrate first and foremost on its own reforms before contemplating further enlargement. It was a serious blow to the EU’s credibility in the country and the region.¹⁴ Macron had earlier already expressed that he is not against enlargement per se, but in favour of further deepening European integration before welcoming any new members.

It is not unthinkable that the initiative coming from Macron - who has also previously advocated for a “Europe of several circles”¹⁵, meaning different degrees of integration - has led the EPC to be viewed with caution. Political leaders in the Western Balkan are wary of the new format being used as a convenient alternative to fully-fledged EU membership, or a diluted form of membership that would see them join only the outer “circle”.

What now?

The reality is that without making the platform more concrete, it is impossible to ascertain what the EPC is or can be. If it becomes a space for dialogue among participating countries, the EPC seems to have little added value for the Western Balkans, which already have plenty of ways to engage in dialogue with the EU institutions - the Berlin Process and the annual EU-Western Balkan summits, to name a few. For economic integration into the European institutions, CEFTA exists, in which all the Western Balkan countries are represented together with Moldova.

The Western Balkan countries are therefore not particularly keen on another initiative to add to the already long list of existing instruments, especially since many of them are small countries with limited administrative capacity to embrace such initiatives. However, refusing to join the EPC could do a lot of harm and further fuel doubts about the countries’ commitment

¹² Results of the first meeting on October 6 in Prague between 44 countries, the President of the European Commission (Ursula von der Leyen) and the President of the European Council (Charles Michel). <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2022/10/06/>

¹³ <https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/european-issues/0633-in-support-of-a-new-approach-to-the-western-balkans-step-by-step-membership-with-a-consolidation>

¹⁴ <https://www.ceps.eu/macrons-non-to-eu-enlargement/>

¹⁵ <https://www.ft.com/content/b9bc8caa-b026-11e8-99ca-68cf89602132>

to Europe. Western Balkan countries therefore find themselves in a precarious position when it comes to deciding whether or not to join such initiatives.

This also fuels the Western Balkans' frustration with initiatives such as the EPC. It is an initiative that at least this region is not exactly keen on. These countries are interested in EU membership, in the first place. The oversaturation of new initiatives do little to solve the real problem of an impasse in the accession process. Under Von der Leyen, it is brightly suggested that the European Commission is making great strides in this process. But years of stalled progress, while several EU countries themselves blatantly regress on the democratic standards which Western Balkan states are expected to meet, are a thorn in the eye and have led to frustration and disillusionment.

The European Union does not need a new format like the EPC to make good on their promise to get the Western Balkans out of the waiting room and into the Union. Instead, it needs to end the continued ambiguity in its intentions towards the region and show true commitment to deliver on accession hopes.