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The Western Balkan enlargement: Unfinished business

In light of the decisions outlined in the Madrid summit declaration – which was agreed upon at the meeting of the North Atlantic Council on 29 June 2022 – the Atlantic alliance’s “unprecedented level of collaboration with the European Union”, and the security implications of this for the Western Balkans, seem to leave one piece of unfinished business: the integration of the Western Balkan countries into the EU.

The Madrid summit declaration highlights the resolute commitment to the strong alliance between the EU and NATO and reaffirms the enduring transatlantic bond between the two. Indeed, it asserts a common dedication to democracy, individual liberty, human rights, the rule of law, security, and peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic realm.

But one should ask whether these goals are realistic and whether the Madrid declaration can be brought more into play in the present situation – a situation in which the Western Balkans are kept out of the game and do not have a formal chance to sit at the EU table.

This is especially relevant for North Macedonia – first of all because three years ago, the country made risky choices when it decided to change its constitutional name. North Macedonia genuinely committed to the Prespa Agreement (the deal between Skopje and Athens that settled the name dispute between the two countries) in which there are clear references to North Macedonia’s accession to the EU, and which includes obligations for the EU to do its utmost in this regard.

However, following the signature of the Prespa Agreement, the opening of accession talks between the EU and North Macedonia (and Albania) have been blocked twice: first by France (October 2019), which claimed there was a need for deep reform of the way the Commission leads negotiations, and then by Bulgaria (November 2020) over a language dispute. The two humiliating blockades have impacted the socio-political dynamism in North Macedonia and caused abject disappointment among Macedonian citizens. Unsurprisingly, this disappointment has been exploited by eurosceptic and ethno-populist platforms, even to the extent of provoking incidents – such as when massive and violent protests were organised to demonstrate against the French proposal to lift

the Bulgarian blockade in summer 2022. Furthermore, there are indications that these protests were driven by 'foreign interventions of third sides' to destabilise this country. And then there are the constant hybrid threats to which North Macedonia is exposed – specifically those related to the 'hoax bomb threats' targeting schools in the capital city of Skopje, at least twice a week, for over two months at the end of 2022. One such threat was also witnessed by European Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen during her visit to Skopje last October.

Yet despite all this, public opinion in North Macedonia still strongly supports the Allies and their policies. More than half of Macedonian citizens thus believe that Russia's aggression against Ukraine is unjustified. This therefore begs the question of what kind of response Macedonian citizens need and deserve in return for their commitment to EU accession? The answer is simple: integration into the EU as soon as possible.

Indeed, North Macedonia's EU integration can be justified firstly because, since its independence after the bloody dissolution of Yugoslavia around 31 years ago, Macedonian politics has been marked by a continuous fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria and the standards they set out for EU integration. Even the authoritarian regime led by Gruevski (2009-2015) was successfully and peacefully overcome, putting North Macedonia back on the democratic track. EU integration is indeed North Macedonia's first political priority, and the country has made enormous investments in this direction. In addition, Macedonian institutions have indisputably shown their commitment to the same security platform as that of the Euro-Atlantic allies.

Secondly, North Macedonia's EU integration can be justified because the region is still plagued by security threats linked to persisting regional disputes, such as the tensions between Kosovo and Serbia, and those related to the Republika Srpska. Both, unfortunately, are still open ground for regional destabilisation.

Besides the tensions outlined above, Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the 'value vacuum' created by the lack of progress in North Macedonia's EU integration agenda create opportunities for the intervention and influence of third countries.

To put it simply, the EU's 'insecurities' and 'anxieties' about the enlargement process have opened the door to the penetration of interests of other foreign actors – and thus to an increasingly visible Russian political interference and to Chinese economic influence.

As long as the stalemate in the EU integration process of North Macedonia (which is also a member of NATO) persists, and against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, this Western Balkan country represents fertile ground for these third-country interferences. Moreover, the risk is the same in other (more problematic) Western Balkan countries, namely Serbia, Kosovo and the Republika Srpska. All of them have a very strong capacity to infect the overall region if their international status is not resolved soon.

A concrete date for North Macedonia's membership of the EU (for example in 2030) should therefore be put in the EU's agenda for 2023. At the same time, the EU should provide specific membership forms for the 'newcomers (for example, by reducing their veto capability in Council's decisions). Otherwise, the current geopolitical circumstances will

increasingly benefit the presence of third actors that represent a strong political force and that create the perfect conditions for growing eurosceptic sentiment.