



Enlargement: a Missed Opportunity

The new approach is a solution to a non-problem: the problem was never the methodology but the political will on the part of EU member states to confront the state capture by incumbent elites in the Balkans

BY TOBY VOGEL
AND KURT BASSUENER
EUOBSERVER

The European Commission missed an opportunity with its new approach to managing EU enlargement, adopted

on Wednesday (5 February).

Instead of taking a hard look at why the current procedure for admitting new members is failing, the commission has tried to appease the most vocal opponent of enlargement – France – with largely cosmetic changes.

The new approach appears likely to achieve its immediate aim, which is to get France to drop its veto against opening membership talks with North Macedonia and Albania.

Nathalie Loiseau, France's former Europe minister who is now president Emmanuel Macron's spokeswoman in the European Parliament, warmly welcomed the proposal when it was presented to MEPs by enlargement commissioner Olivér Várhelyi, although she also warned "What counts is what's actually happening, not what's written on a piece of paper."

What the new approach does not achieve, however, is to address the shortcomings of the policy itself, which has been in crisis for some time.

Despite meeting the EU's conditions for starting membership talks, North Macedonia and Albania were blocked by France (supported, in the case of Albania, by the Netherlands and Denmark).

Serbia and Montenegro have been negotiating membership for six and eight years, respectively, with no end in sight and amid considerable backsliding on rule of law and democratic practices in Serbia and little positive change in Montenegro.

Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina are years away from even starting talks and are facing considerable obstacles before they can hope to do so.

Instead of using this moment to analyse the failures of the current accession process, as we at Democratization Policy Council argued in a policy note in December, the commission has largely restricted itself to responding to – and, thankfully, toning down – many of the French demands laid out in a hastily written discussion paper that was thin on substance – as it was meant to justify Macron's blockage of October 2019, and due to France's long-term absence from the region.

Some of these changes are welcome.

In contrast to Macron's non-paper, the commission's new approach frontloads democratic fundamentals and the rule of law, ahead of economic issues. This was a glaring – and telling – omission in the French document, from which the words "democracy," "corruption," and "state capture" were absent.

Where the French paper was transactional and economics-led, the commission's blueprint recognises the transformational potential of EU enlargement.

For that potential to be realised, however, the EU must be serious in confronting entrenched elites in the candidate countries.

The new methodology adopted this week will not do this on its own – but it contains indications that the commission is beginning to understand this, despite its failure to undertake a thorough policy review.

It reaffirms the EU's commitment to uphold conditionality and proposes a mechanism that would no longer allow a minority of illiberal member states to block sanctions for backsliding in the candidate countries.

In addition, the enhanced role of the member states carries both opportunities and risks. Member states can strengthen and deepen messages coming from Brussels, and can potentially be more direct and open in messaging than can the Commission.

There will be a new persuasive and argumentative burden



Publisher: WESTERN BALKANS e-MEDIA GROUP, POENTA d.o.o. Sarajevo, Augusta Brauna 3 ● Editor - in - Chief: AMRA ZIMIC ● Senior Editors: SANJA LJUBICIC, RASID KRUPALIJA ● Editors: DANIJELA MRKIC, ENIS LJUBOVIC ● Office Assistant: MUSTAFA BAHTANOVIC ● DTP: Bekir Tvrtkovic, Marketing: INDIRA RAHMANOVIC ● GSM: 061 145 464, Phone: 033 942 226 ● www.bosniadaily.co.ba, bdaily@megatel.ba





The EU's flag flies in the bloc's capital city, Brussels, to welcome previous countries welcomed to join

put on those capitals that hold dear the core values of the EU and the benefits of enlargement – both in terms of conversations with candidates, as well as with their own domestic constituencies.

Further, confronting the potentially destructive dynamics of illiberal actors (such as Hungary and Poland) and those with their own particular interests (namely Croatia) will require both tactful diplomacy and the beginnings of discussions on the EU's own norms, and how the Union may itself be strengthened to shield it from being corroded from within.

While these positive elements are welcome, they are grossly inadequate.

The new approach is a solution to a non-problem: the problem was never the methodology but the political will on the part of EU member states to confront the state capture by incumbent elites in the Balkans.

The new methodology still views governments as representative, responsive and accountable, instead of recognising that citizens are the constituency on which EU enlargement policy needs to be directly focused, without the filter of party-controlled media outlets and a patronage-driven economy.

The commission proposal offers some hints of a partial shift towards more direct communication of the EU with citizens in the candidate countries, but still far away from the cultural revolution it would take for European officials to accept citizens as their primary partners.

Future iterations of this 're-think' should view independent local watchdogs as the key element in local monitoring and assessment of all reform processes – for too long the very institutions captured by state and party have been able to essentially monitor themselves, undermining the integrity of the process and contributing to scepticism among aware but weary citizens.

This would strengthen the EU's efforts to get governments to adhere to their commitments, as well as civic bottom-up efforts for accountable governments and the dignity of the people they represent.

The communication also fails to demonstrate an understanding of the counterproductive and damaging role that EU funds plays in actually strengthening regional political

economies of state and party capture.

Direct EU structural funds, and also international financing often secured based on confidence manufactured by enlargement promises, provides a tidy additional subsidy to further feed patronage through public employment, "public private partnerships" (which in reality provide yet another opportunity for private hands to benefit from public largesse) and tenders, often related to lucrative infrastructure projects. All of these weaknesses can only be addressed through genuine reforms in the rule of law – which has been elusive for years precisely because of the dynamics of party control. Euros from Brussels must be independently tracked and monitored to stop this external subsidy to internal social controls. If necessary, funding should be summarily stopped.

Finally, while it is clear that there is an interest in keeping Montenegro and Serbia's putative status as frontrunners and to belatedly invite North Macedonia and Albania to open negotiations, the status of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo cannot be ignored, nor can they be allowed to fester in a separate enlargement ghetto.

The nature of the wars has already crippled these countries; among the greatest threats now is massive demographic decline as citizens have decided to go to the EU if the EU won't come to them.

Remaining clear on conditionality and reform requirements, serving as a check on predatory neighbours and magnifying the voices of citizens against regimes that have failed them for a generation is critical, but so is avoiding a two-class approach to enlargement which leaves the region's most vulnerable countries outside the gate.

In sum, the commission's proposal fails to address the main problems of enlargement policy – the presumption of partnership with Balkan elites, the lack of will to use existing tools, and the disruptive potential of the EU's own illiberal member states such as Hungary and Poland.

Will it lead to more robust commitment by the member states to the principles of enlargement, and stronger political will to confront entrenched elites? Experience and our reading of the communication makes us sceptical.