

Balkan clouds over EU enlargement

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ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

In the south Caucasus state of Georgia, on which the EU conferred candidate status last year, the government pressed ahead with a law on “foreign agents” that resembles a measure passed in Russia to crush political dissent. [...]the parliamentary assembly of the Council of Europe, a pan-European body dedicated to protecting human rights, voted to admit Kosovo, the former Serbian province that declared independence in 2008. For an analysis of why the EU’s decision was misguided, please read this superb essay by Edward Joseph for the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies. [...]Bulgaria and North Macedonia may soon be even more at loggerheads on one of the core issues that needs to be resolved in order to advance EU enlargement.

FULL TEXT

Welcome back. Month by month, Europe’s neighbourhood seems to grow more dangerous —a point illustrated by the military strikes by Iran and Israel on each other’s territory, and by Ukraine’s desperate struggle to repel Russian invaders. Even in the EU’s Balkan backyard, the troubles are mounting.

I’ll concentrate on a Balkan problem that, in my view, receives too little attention: the tensions between Bulgaria, an EU member, and North Macedonia, which hopes to join the 27-nation club. I suspect these tensions are about to get worse. That bodes ill for the EU’s ambition to expand its membership into eastern and south-eastern Europe. I’m at tony.barber@ft.com.

Obstacles to EU enlargement

First, let’s look at some incidents this week that illustrate how difficult it will be to make progress on EU enlargement. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, ethnic Serb members of the municipal council of Srebrenica voted to rename 25 of the town’s streets, commemorating their own community and Serb historical personalities while ignoring the Bosnian Serb massacre in 1995 of thousands of Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) men and boys.

Last month, I set out the reasons why EU membership for Bosnia and Herzegovina is still a long way off, despite the best intentions of Brussels. The vote in Srebrenica is the exact opposite of what is needed to move forward Bosnia’s candidacy.

In the south Caucasus state of Georgia, on which the EU conferred candidate status last year, the government pressed ahead with a law on “foreign agents” that resembles a measure passed in Russia to crush political dissent. This initiative shows that Georgia’s government, far from striving to meet the EU’s admission criteria on democracy and the rule of law, is in practice making a mockery of them.

Finally, the parliamentary assembly of the Council of Europe, a pan-European body dedicated to protecting human rights, voted to admit Kosovo, the former Serbian province that declared independence in 2008. If approved by the council’s member states, this would mark a significant step towards the wider international recognition of Kosovo that Serbia and other states, notably Russia, oppose.

Whatever the merits of that vote, it drew an angry reaction from Serbia, making reconciliation between the two countries —a condition of EU membership for both —an even more remote prospect. There are, of course, other grounds for doubting Serbia’s suitability for EU entry, at least under its current leadership.

EU sets a bad Balkan precedent

And so to Bulgaria and North Macedonia.

The latter is one of six potential Balkan EU members, the others being Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo, Montenegro and

Serbia. Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine are in the same queue for entry, and Turkey is also a candidate —though more on paper than in reality.

The case of North Macedonia stands out because of a short-sighted decision taken by the EU in July 2022 when, at long last, it gave the green light to starting membership talks with Skopje (the country was originally made a candidate in 2005).

In essence, the EU said North Macedonia cannot join unless it meets a rigorous set of demands from Bulgaria, its neighbour, related to language, national identity and history —issues on which the two countries have a long and complicated relationship.

For an analysis of why the EU's decision was misguided, please read this superb essay by Edward Joseph for the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies.

As Joseph explains, the decision not only gives Bulgaria a de facto veto over North Macedonia's EU entry talks, but also sets a terrible precedent for the larger process of enlargement. It is all too easy to imagine, for example, Croatia demanding the right to impose Bulgarian-like conditions on Serbia, or Hungary on Ukraine.

Any country hoping to join the EU could be blocked by an existing member state with grievances that are based on one-sided readings of history and national identity. The EU ought to be an honest broker in such disputes, but in this case it has thrown its weight behind Bulgaria.

Elections in North Macedonia and Bulgaria

What are the consequences?

One step demanded of North Macedonia is that it should amend its constitution to make mention of Bulgarians as one of the country's "constituent peoples". This is quite a big ask, given that Bulgaria doesn't recognise the Macedonian language (regarding it as a branch of Bulgarian) or the existence of a Macedonian minority in Bulgaria. Still, North Macedonia's present government bowed to pressure to make the change because it is keen to join the EU. However, the amendment has not passed because the government lacks a large enough parliamentary majority.

Now matters are set to take a turn for the worse. North Macedonia will hold presidential elections on Wednesday. If no candidate wins outright, a second round will be held on May 8, coinciding with parliamentary elections.

I make no prediction about the presidential contest, which will be closely fought. But it seems likely that the parliamentary elections will be won by the rightwing nationalist VMRO-DPMNE party, which is adamantly opposed to the constitutional amendment.

Meanwhile, Bulgaria is to hold parliamentary elections on June 9 —the sixth such vote in three years. There may be no outright winner, but the frontrunner in opinion polls is the conservative Gerb party of former premier Boyko Borisov. It is certain that any Borisov-led government would take a hard line on the need to change North Macedonia's constitution.

In short, Bulgaria and North Macedonia may soon be even more at loggerheads on one of the core issues that needs to be resolved in order to advance EU enlargement.

Macedonian nationalism

A brief word on VMRO-DPMNE, a party whose name (surely one of the longest in European politics) stands for the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation-Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity.

This party was once led by Nikola Gruevski, a former premier who was convicted of corruption and then fled North Macedonia in 2018 with the help of Hungarian officials.

It is a sign of the murky role played in the Balkans by Hungary and its premier Viktor Orbán that Gruevski has been busy over the past few years running a business despite his status as a fugitive from justice.

The party has dissociated itself from Gruevski, but it stands for an assertive Macedonian nationalism that its opponents label *antikvizacija* ("antiquisation"). As Janelle Clausen and Leon Hartwell explain for the Center for European Policy Analysis think-tank, this term describes the party's insistence —extremely controversial in Greece —that modern Macedonian identity descends from the era of Alexander the Great more than 2,000 years ago.

These nationalist views account for the party's dislike of the 2019 Prespa agreement with Greece. Under this

accord, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia agreed to change its name to North Macedonia, with the aim of allaying Greek fears of claims from Skopje on Greek territory and cultural identity.

The Prespa agreement marked a rare moment of progress in tackling the historically fraught problems of the Balkans. But, as we see with Bulgaria and North Macedonia —not to mention Serbia and Kosovo, or Bosnia —there's an ever-present risk that the region's disputes over identity, heritage and language will become harder, not easier, to solve.

Corruption

Solutions are even more elusive because of deep-seated corruption, organised crime and inadequacies in the rule of law across the Balkans.

For example, one reason why VMRO-DPMNE seems likely to win North Macedonia's elections is because of public discontent with corruption.

The EU acknowledges the problem. The European Commission's latest annual report on North Macedonia, published in November, states:

There was no progress on the judiciary during the reporting period . . . In the prevention and fight against corruption . . . no progress was made. Corruption remains prevalent in many areas and is an issue of concern.

It so happens that there is also a corruption problem in Bulgaria. Last year, the US Treasury imposed sanctions on five then current or former Bulgarian government officials. A Treasury statement didn't mince its words:

Their diverse profiles and long-standing prominence in Bulgarian politics illustrate the extent to which corruption has become entrenched across ministries, parties and state-owned industries.

For the EU, the difficulty is that, having admitted Bulgaria in 2007, it found it lacked the leverage to root out corruption. It didn't help that former German chancellor Angela Merkel regarded Borisov as a useful ally from the same centre-right family of political parties.

As the EU considers how to promote its enlargement project, one thing is certain: some governments will be asking if it is wise to admit countries with endemic corruption when the lesson from Bulgaria's case is that membership actually allowed the problem to fester.

Coupled with the likely rise in frictions between Bulgaria and North Macedonia, that leaves an awful lot on the EU's plate to sort out.

More on this topic

Three lessons from the 2004 "big bang" enlargement —an essay by Veronica Anghel and Erik Jones for the journal *Politics and Governance*

Tony's picks of the week

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Austria's Raiffeisen Bank International is committed to reducing its operations in Russia, but the lender has recently posted advertisements indicating ambitions to hire Russia-based staff and grow its business there. The FT's Chris Cook, Sam Jones, Euan Healy and Owen Walker report

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If strategic competition between the US and its great power rivals turns violent, it is likely to take the form of irregular, localised conflicts, much as it did during the cold war, Jacob Shapiro and Liam Collins write for the War on the Rocks website

Tony Barber

DETAILS

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