
WE ARE AWARE OF 'EUROPEISATION FATIGUE', WARNS ALBANIAN MINISTER

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Albanian foreign minister Ditmir Bushati briefed a small group of Brussels journalists yesterday (26 April) about his countrys EU ambitions, following the Commissions proposal to start accession negotiations with Tirana and a visit of Prime Minister Edi Rama to Berlin last Wednesday.

The European Commission proposed on 17 April to open EU membership talks with Albania and Macedonia, in line with its new focus on the integration of the Western Balkans.

The renewed interest in the region, which has made some progress in the past year in resolving disputes with neighbours and embraced a more reform-friendly agenda, coincides with concerns about the growing interest of non-EU countries to gain a foothold there, most notably Russia and China.

In the meantime, French President Emmanuel Macron told the European Parliament that he did not want further EU enlargement before the bloc makes reforms allowing it to function more successfully.

The Brief - Macron pulls the Balkan rug

Playing fast and loose with the Balkans is not a great idea. The EU has already found that out the hard way, more than once. Now the region needs clarity and supervision in order to gradually progress towards mainstream Europe. Apparently Emmanuel Macron missed that memo.

In Berlin, Rama warned that Russia was also intent on radicalising Albanias Muslims, and urged the EU not to leave a space for other countries to fill.

Don't turn your back on us, Albania PM tells EU

Denying Albania the prospect of one day becoming a European Union member could fuel Muslim radicalisation in the Balkan country, endangering regional stability, its prime minister Edi Rama said.

Europeisation fatigue

Asked by EURACTIV if Albania was disturbed by Macrons remarks, Bushati made it clear that his country understood the blocs problems, but wanted to start the accession negotiations to better anchor itself with the EU.

He said that Albania clearly sees the divide between the northern and the southern part of Europe, which, in his words, is based on levels of economic development, and an east-west divide based on values.

There is also Europe-isation fatigue, Bushati said, reminding that previously the term used was enlargement fatigue. Europe-isation fatigue, he said, was linked to the backtracking on the rule of law in some member states.

He said he understood that the process will take longer, and that consequently it was important to have the strategic framework of the EU accession talks. We havent seen Macrons statements as necessarily precluding Western Balkans from joining the EU, he insisted.

We can catch up, he insisted, when asked if Albania feels disadvantaged as Montenegro and Serbia, who are already conducting accession talks, are frequently been named as frontrunners.

The minister explained that in terms of judicial reform, Albanias programme of vetting judges, was more advanced than in Serbia and Montenegro.

We are even doing something member states are not doing, he added, explaining that the reform, which enjoys popular support, is positive for the economic environment, and as the Commission has said, is a precedent for other countries in the region.

Albanian foreign minister: New Balkan alliances oppose tribunals

In a wide-ranging interview, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Albania Ditmir Bushati explained the political situation in his country, the so-called Tirana platform that has raised eyebrows in Macedonia, Balkan geopolitics and the need for the EU to do more for the six candidate countries.

Bushati said that judicial reform is being tackled at an early stage of Albanias accession process, even before the start of accession talks.

The fact that there are disputes in terms of rule of law within EU member states, the fact that in the Enlargement strategy the Commission has pointed out that by the end of this year it will provide a catalogue on the rule of law, applicable for member states is a clear signal for us to demonstrate willingness to overcome difficulties at an early stage of the accession process, he said.

The reform, he admitted, was not easy, as the country needs to change one third of its constitution, he said. However he stressed that judicial reform was passed with the support of 140 votes in Parliament out of 140, thanks to the EU drive.

Bushati also stressed that the country has inserted in its constitution the international monitoring operation, which is a body constituted from retired judges and prosecutors from EU member

states, who are assisting their Albanian colleagues in the vetting process.

We are going beyond what is taking place in EU member states. Its not a complaint, its just how enlargement process is taking place in the current days, he said.

Other issues which the country plans to solve at an early stage are bilateral disputes, as well as the progressive and full alignment with EU policies. He added that this was particularly important at a critical moment when you see the influence of third actors not only in the applicant countries, but in South-East Europe and Adriatic Europe.

Asked about Russia, mentioned by Rama in Berlin, he said:

We dont see Russia as a threat per se, but certainly we are worried by disruptive activities for the democratic state-building in the region. When we speak about the Western Balkans, Russia has traditionally been there. And there is not only Russia, there are other actors.

Macedonia name issue

Asked if his country risks being a hostage to Macedonias name dispute, being on the same timetable as its neighbour on the start accession talks, he said he was a cautious optimist as far as the name dispute is concerned.

I hope that both neighbours, Greece and Macedonia, will be able to put their relationship on a stable and solid base, and that there might be also a sequence of actions and solutions, on the name issue and other aspects related to this process, which might go beyond the June Council, he said.

Asked what should Albania do before the June Council, which must decide by unanimity whether or not to open accession negotiations with Albania and Macedonia, he said that his country would make the effort of maintaining and deepening the current rhythm of reform, and that this effort would continue beyond the June, or the December Council.

We must make sure that in the reforms, we have reached the point of no-return, he said, stressing the need to strengthen the human and administrative capacity in the judiciary.

Asked how the scepticism of some member states regarding future EU enlargement could be overcome, he quoted Council President Donald Tusk who recently said that the EU accession process is a race with obstacles, not a motorway. But he also said that some EU members had concerns on issues which sometimes go beyond the scope of the accession process, implying that they put pressure on EU hopefuls for achieving national goals.

He urged EU leaders to agree to launch accession negotiations, saying that by being on the table, the bar will be higher for us, the leverage of the EU and the member states will be bigger.

Sofia summit not about enlargement

Asked about his countrys expectations from the upcoming Western Balkans summit in Sofia on 17 May, he said it was important that this event, the first of its kind since the Thessaloniki summit 15

years ago, would issue a clear political message about the EU perspective of the Western Balkans. Secondly, he said it was important to deepen the connectivity agenda in the region, an effort initiated under the Berlin process.

The Berlin Process in the new enlargement strategy

Since its first summit in Berlin in 2014, the Berlin Process □ a regional cooperation initiative bringing together seven key member states and the six Western Balkan countries □ has provided a unique contribution to regional cooperation, writes Ardian Hackaj.

Bushati stressed that the Sofia summit could address the gap between member and non-member states, because member states, such as Bulgaria or Greece, have access to structural funds, and non-members have to rely on the state budget, knowing that in the Western Balkans the fiscal space is very tight.

He also expected the Sofia summit to prepare the ground for the next long-term EU budget. If there is no correlation between the political vision and the budgetary program, enlargement cannot happen, he said

Asked about the position of Spain, the prime minister of which said he may not even come if Kosovo is participating, he said:

Rajoy has an issue with Western Balkans summit in Sofia

Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy has told his Bulgarian colleague Boyko Borissov in no uncertain terms that he has a problem with the Western Balkans summit in Sofia, scheduled for 17 May, and may not even come if Kosovo is participating.

The Sofia summit is not an enlargements summit. It is a summit which will hopefully lay the ground for the implementation of projects, related to connectivity, and will certainly confirm the European perspective of the region.

Asked about Islamic de-radicalisation in the Balkans, Bushati said his countrys experience was quite unique, and that it won praise by the EU and the US. He explained that the experience was based on countering violent extremism, and discouraging this phenomenon by soft methods, dialogue with religious leaders, introduction to new curricula in the education system.

The biggest question is returnees, he said, adding that this was an issue requiring a well-designed program, calling on the EU to provide support to all countries affected by this phenomenon.

Kaynak/Source: