
EU SPLIT ON WESTERN BALKANS ACCESSION

-

12.06.2019

EU Observer (12 June 2019)

Europe should agree to open accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia this month to "ensure the credibility of EU enlargement policy", 14 member states have said.

Albanian and North Macedonian leaders said the same on Tuesday (11 June).

But the pressure might not be enough to get sceptics, including France and Germany, to budge.

The 14 countries' foreign ministers spoke out in a joint statement ahead of EU talks at a so-called General Affairs Council (GAC) next week, in which all 28 member states must agree to take the decision.

"The launch of accession talks ... will serve as an important motivational factor for the whole region," they said.

"Starting the negotiations in June 2019 will also contribute to strengthening countries' resilience to external, detrimental interests of other players and ensure that EU continues are the leading player for a positive regional transformation," they added, in an allusion to Russian competition for influence in the Western Balkans.

The group-of-14 included all the former Iron Curtain member states which joined the EU after 2004, except Romania, which opted out because it is meant to be neutral as the current holder of the EU presidency.

Austria and Italy, which neighbour the Balkans region, as well as Malta, also signed up.

The EU's most powerful members, France and Germany, and two other enlargement sceptics, Denmark and the Netherlands, stayed out, however.

For his part, Albania's prime minister Edi Rama also urged the EU to move ahead on a visit to Brussels the same day.

North Macedonia's prime minister Zoran Zaev said the same in Prague and the country's president is set to repeat the appeal in Brussels on Wednesday.

Rama used an anatomical metaphor, saying Balkan states were "an organ" of the EU "body" that surrounds them.

"Europe has to make a choice what to do with this organ - to let it bleed out and create problems

for itself [the EU] or to be part of the body," he said.

"Europe should act geo-strategically and geopolitically," he added, in another allusion to Russia.

'Tragic region'

The European Commission president, speaking alongside Rama, said he stood by his officials' recommendation, issued last week, to open the talks.

Picking up on Rama's bloody imagery, he said the EU had "no right to play games" in the "tragic region", which endured a series of wars just two decades ago.

"We have to make it very crystal clear that the moment has come to open negotiations," Juncker said.

North Macedonia's Zaev said in Prague also on Tuesday that his country had "overcome all [negative] stereotypes and disagreements" due to its historic name deal with Greece earlier this year.

"European politicians now have to keep their word," Czech leader Andrei Babis added.

"It would be wrong if the Western Balkans did not belong to Europe and potentially Schengen [the EU's free-travel area]," Babis said.

The appeals came after the German parliament, last Thursday, approved North Macedonia's entry into Nato, but put off a decision on the EU talks until after its summer recess.

France, Denmark, and the Netherlands already blocked the opening of the EU talks last year due to concerns on corruption, organised crime, and lack of rule of law.

And Juncker, on Tuesday, admitted that next week's GAC was unlikely to unlock the process.

It was not "mission impossible" to change minds in France and Germany, he noted.

But "I'm not focusing on June because there are parliaments which have to approve, they are not in session in June, so it could be later," he also said.

Waiting room

The EU has already opened accession talks with Montenegro and Serbia after taking in Croatia and Slovenia in recent years.

Bosnia and Kosovo, which is not recognised by five EU states or Serbia, are still waiting for the green light.

But Juncker warned that unless Kosovo and Serbia agreed to normalise relations in EU-brokered talks, then neither of them would get in.

"We don't want to import instability into the EU, we want to export stability to these countries, or whatever you call them," he said on Tuesday, in a nod to the Kosovo non-recognition problem.

<https://euobserver.com/enlargement/145128>

Kaynak/Source: