
ALBANIA AND NORTH MACEDONIA READY TO START ACCESSION NEGOTIATIONS PENDING COUNCIL DECISION

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The European Commission recommended already in May this year that the Council should open negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia after the two countries had delivered on reforms. In particular North Macedonia has waited for years for this moment but the opening of negotiations was blocked in the past by Greece because of the name issue. This painful issue was resolved last year.

It came therefore as a surprise that the General Affairs Council, meeting on 15 October in Luxembourg, was not able to reach a unanimous decision on opening the negotiations. Reportedly, three Member States, France, the Netherlands and Denmark, opposed accepting the Commissions recommendation concerning both or one of the countries.

Johannes Hahn, the Commissioner in charge of Enlargement, could not hide his disappointment at the press conference on Tuesday. I really regret this because its again not a moment which we can be proud of. There is no doubt that any further postponement would damage our credibility in the Western Balkans and our ambition to become a stronger global power, he said.

He assured that the two candidate countries have met all conditions for opening negotiations and that apparently nothing has happened since the Commissions recommendation in May to change that conclusion. He also calmed those Member States that might think that opening negotiations would mean that Albania and North Macedonia would join EU any year soon.

A positive decision would mean that we can start preparing the negotiations, decide on benchmarks and opening the first chapters on the rule of law where we have a lot of leverage, he explained. His hope is now that the heads of state at the European Council will restore the EUs credibility in the enlargement process.

Tytti Tuppurainen, Finnish minister for European Affairs and representing the Finnish EU-presidency, assured that the Council had done everything in its power and confirmed that 25 countries had been in favour of opening the negotiations but declined to explain why the three countries had been against the idea. I dont want to name and shame the countries, she said.

The Brussels Times asked Commissioner Hahne at a press briefing with the Macedonian Prime Minister Zoltan Zaev on Wednesday if it was not a matter of transparency to explain the political motivations as to why some Member States had objected against the opening of negotiations despite the Commissions recommendation to do so.

Hahne replied that it was an internal meeting and declined to disclose the positions of individual Member States. We have to deliver and give a green light to opening the negotiations. If not properly rewarded for the reform agenda, there is no incentive to continue. I hope that the leaders at the European Council will reconsider the broader political assessment of the situation.

While Albania, at least in the past, was known for its dysfunctional parliament, North Macedonia was praised by Hahne for having created an atmosphere of cooperation in its parliament. The countries not in favour of opening negotiations have probably in mind previous enlargement rounds when candidate countries were prematurely accepted.

Dimitris Avramopoulos, the Greek Commissioner for migration, warned on Wednesday against a re-balkanisation of the region if Albania and North Macedonia, both neighbours to Greece, would be denied the opening of accession negotiations.

<https://www.brusselstimes.com/belgium/73867/how-the-eu-summit-will-disrupt-brussels-traffic-on-thursday-and-friday-european-brexitee-schuman-metro-bus-safety-zone/>

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