

THE EUROPEAN UNION FINALLY REMEMBERED ENLARGEMENT - BUT WHERE IS TURKEY?

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The European Union's Council conclusions of 14 December, 2021, finally addressed the enlargement process which had been set aside for a long time.

The six countries of the Western Balkans felt left out. Despite comments that China, Russia and even Turkey were negatively influencing these countries, no concrete steps were taken regarding moving up the enlargement process. Member states made an effort to avoid even mentioning 2030, which was put forward by some candidates at the Western Balkans Summit held in Slovenia on October 6, 2021 as the earliest possible accession. However, it seems they forgot that in February 2018, the Commission mentioned that 2025 could be a potential year for Serbia's and Montenegro's membership. Perhaps the problems experienced with those who joined after 2004 led to this. However, at least the Commissioner for Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi said that "The EU is not complete without the Western Balkans."

Enlargement is one of the most important tools the EU has in foreign policy. Established in 1957 as the European Economic Community and evolving as it changed its name, it continuously expanded until the United Kingdom departed. The first expansion took place in 1973, starting ironically with the United Kingdom as well as Denmark and Ireland. Croatia, which started membership negotiations with Turkey in 2005, is the last country to join the EU in 2013. Since then, no other country acceded and enlargement has remained in the background as a low priority of the EU.

One of the most criticized issues was the treatment faced by North Macedonia. Having struggled to join the EU and NATO since declaring its independence in 1991 due to the name issue with Greece, Macedonia finally conceded and changed its name, but obstacles remained and it faced objections from other members. Although the EU took the decision in March 2020 that Albania and North Macedonia could start membership negotiations, this time Bulgaria put pressure on Macedonia by opening up the matters relating to culture, language and history. Albania remained in the waiting room as they were evaluated in the same basket.

With the change of government in Bulgaria, it is now possible that membership negotiations could start as soon as possible. Albania also benefits from this development. Accession talks should start with these countries in 2022.

Although Montenegro is the most advanced in the accession process, which began in 2012, the negotiations were deliberately slowed down. Then President of the European

Commission Jean-Claude Juncker had pointed out that there would be no enlargement during his term in office (2014 – 19). Despite the fact that Serbia started membership negotiations in 2014, it continues to be reminded by the EU that it needs to resolve its issues with Kosovo, owing to lessons learned from the Cyprus question. The EU does not want to get tangled in any further border matters. Applications from Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina are pending. The fates of Serbia and Kosovo are intertwined.

Turkey was also mentioned in the conclusions. In fact, nine paragraphs were devoted to it. Perhaps the most positive aspect is that Turkey was mentioned as a candidate after a long time. For several years, the EU had intentionally avoided stating this in Council conclusions. However, the only other favorable point was the EU's appreciation of Turkey's handling of the millions of refugees. Apart from these, regression in fundamental rights, backsliding in freedom of expression and the rule of law, problems caused by the Cyprus issue (Eastern Mediterranean, Varosha), issues of getting along with neighbors, compliance with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policies and the irritants encountered in the implementation of the Customs Union were stated. Lastly, the Conclusions noted that as Turkey is moving away from the EU, accession negotiations have come to a standstill and in this case, new chapters will neither be opened nor closed. The visa issue was never mentioned. In short, Turkey was subjected to heavy criticism with little incentive to change.

Turkey-EU relations have lost ground since the coup attempt of 15 July 2016 and have not improved. More than five years have passed since the last negotiation chapter was opened. The table below summarizes the situation.

Country	Application for Membership	Start of Negotiations	Opened Chapters ¹	Closed Chapters
Turkey	1987	2005	16	1
Montenegro	2008	2012	33	3
Serbia	2009	2014	22	2

To be fair, Turkey is not blameless. Despite commitments made during the last five years, Turkey has yet to fulfil the remaining six criteria on visa exemption. However, the EU has an ambivalent attitude on modernizing the Customs Union. While there were no conditions for these negotiations in the 18 March 2016 Statement, the EU later declared that these would not start unless there was progress in the fields of fundamental rights and the rule of law, using political developments following the July 15 coup attempt in Turkey as an excuse. Now the EU calls for the irritants that have festered in the current Customs Union, as well as some other issues to be overcome. Among them, it expects the implementation of the Customs Union to all EU members, in other words, Southern Cyprus.

When you look at the aftermath of these conclusions, it seems that the EU's criticisms do not have the same old effect on Turkey. Mutual distrust continues. Discussions among leaders and Ministers happen more regularly than before where both sides cite

¹ There are overall 35 chapters.

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their priorities and although some visits and meetings take place, there are no concrete steps. This strange situation may continue without any breakthrough until the Presidential elections in Turkey, which are expected to be held in June 2023 at the latest. However, this is not tenable, nor sustainable and if it continues, the gap between the parties will open even more. Indifference is not a policy. The time has come to take action. The question is who will take the first step and whether there will be a response.