

EU risks losing credibility in Western Balkans if no North Macedonia accession talks this summer

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News

The EU will lose “credibility” in the Western Balkans if it refuses to open accession talks with North Macedonia this summer, according to the country’s chief accession negotiator.



Skopje, North Macedonia | *Photo credit: Press Association*

Speaking in Brussels, Bojan Marichikj said he hopes the country will be given the green light to start talks when the issue is discussed at a general affairs ministerial later this month.

Pointing out that North Macedonia had again been given a positive progress report by the Commission on its reform process, he said, “We have been in the waiting room [for accession talks to start] for 15 years now.”

“This is now about trust and the EU keeping its promise. If, however, we are now told to wait another three, six or nine months, that will completely destroy the EU’s credibility for people in my country. That is why it is crucial that these negotiations are opened this month”, he said.

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Marichikj was speaking on Tuesday at a European Policy Centre debate on the prospects for accession talks, both for North Macedonia and Albania.

Pointing out that North Macedonia had received a “positive” report from the Commission every year for the past ten years, he said, “We started on our EU path in 2001 and have had candidate status since 2005 ... The fact that we are still talking about this in 2019 reflects a failure on the part of the EU.”

He outlined the various internal reforms, including changes to the judicial system and efforts to tackle serious crime and corruption that have taken place, often at “high political cost”.

“Only three years ago we were seen as a ‘captured state’ but, according to the latest progress report from the Commission, we are a ‘shining light’”.

“This is now about trust and the EU keeping its promise. If, however, we are now told to wait another three, six or nine months, that will completely destroy the EU’s credibility for people in my country” **Bojan Marichikj**

Sokil Dedja, deputy minister for Europe and foreign affairs in Albania, also outlined the steps his country had taken in an effort to meet the criteria to start accession talks.

He said, “We have cleaned up the justice system, including increasing the number of convictions for corruption, and almost entirely eradicated the cultivation and trafficking of cannabis.”

“We have had to overcome some very strong vested interests to implement the reforms, all of which have been recognised by international observers.”

He added, “This is now a very important moment for us. We do not expect to join the EU tomorrow but we are looking to the EU for a signal, a message, regarding the unprecedented and comprehensive reform programme in Albania.”

“This is important, not least for regional stability.”

He also addressed the “rise of populism” across Europe, including the Western Balkans, which will be “very difficult to counter.”

“The populists present things in a black and white and very simplified way. This is easy to sell but hard to counter.”

A “fear” of further EU enlargement also existed among much of the population, he said.

“We must not surrender to this attitude but fight it,” he argued.

Paul Butcher, a policy analyst at the EPC who chaired the debate, said the Commission, for the second successive year, had recently recommended opening accession talks with the two countries but a decision on this had been delayed until this month.

“The Commission says that progress has been made on the necessary reforms but the green light for talks to start is still not guaranteed,” he said.

About the author

Martin Banks is a senior reporter at The Parliament Magazine

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