EU set to start membership talks with Albania and North Macedonia

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News

An EU General Affairs Council meeting today is likely to give the go ahead - a decision that has been long awaited in the region.

The development comes after France and the Netherlands - the two EU countries objecting to the commencement of talks - were successful in pressing for changes to the process under which future EU enlargement is decided.

It is expected that it will be "virtual" meeting, with no EU ministers in Brussels, due to the unfolding crisis over the spread of Coronavirus.
According to a draft EU paper on the issue, enlargement in future would be “subject to stronger political steering, based on objective criteria and rigorous positive and negative conditionality, and reversibility.”

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It is believed that Albania and North Macedonia will be asked to address certain accession-related issues, including internal reforms and the fight against serious and organised crime.

The European Parliament, in a resolution last autumn, expressed disappointment that Albania and North Macedonia were not able to start accession talks, stressing that the enlargement process has played a decisive role in stabilising the Western Balkans.

German MEP Michael Gahler, the EPP Group spokesperson for foreign affairs, said, “The enlargement policy must continue to promote European values, stability and prosperity beyond current EU borders.”

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“I wish both Albania and North Macedonia a continued and speedy advancement on the path of the reforms, bringing their economies closer to European standards, for the benefit of their citizens and of the whole region,” said Gahler, who was speaking earlier on Tuesday.

His group has always supported what Gahler calls a merit-based enlargement process, which mirrors the progress made by each candidate country.

“Countries who work harder and achieve EU standards quicker should see their efforts rewarded. In case the progress turns out to be insufficient, negotiations should be halted or their final goal jointly redefined,” he said.

EPP deputy chair Andrey Kovatchev underlined that both countries have fulfilled all required criteria for starting negotiation talks, but said that the decision to move forward had been blocked due to the “scepticism of some EU Member States.”

“By opening the accession talks, the European Union fulfils its commitment. Solidarity is fundamental, not only for our physical survival, but also to ensure the continuation of the European idea of unity,” said Kovatchev.

“I would like to be able to congratulate, later today, both Albania and North Macedonia on their first step towards full European integration. Of course, future progress in the accession talks fully depends
on the reforms taken up by Skopje and Tirana, and their willingness to overcome obstacles in their reform process,” he added.

The European Greens said that as both central European countries “have presented significant democratic reforms, it is now crucial for the EU to move forward.”

A statement went on, “The European Greens have long called for the EU accession process to start with these two countries. The strong pro-European sentiment among these countries and their demonstrated and successful efforts to implement meaningful reforms must be taken into account by EU Member States.”

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“Albania has met all necessary criteria since 2018 and has carried out one of the most far-reaching judicial reforms to get to the point it is at now. North Macedonia has delivered tangible and sustainable results in key areas, such as the judicial reforms, high corruption cases, security reforms, and public administration reforms.”

“North Macedonia has made extraordinary efforts to open the door to Europe by concluding bilateral agreements with Bulgaria and in particular the historic Prespa Agreement with Greece. Failing to start the accession process now will send the wrong message and will result in a weakening of the strong pro-European movements in the Western Balkans.”

Further comment came from Austrian member Thomas Waitz, co-chair of the European Green Party, who said, “The EU accession negotiations are a driving force for the further development of the rule of law in key areas such as media and press freedom, human rights and the fight against corruption. This is important not only for securing peace in the region, but also for the EU's foreign and security policy.”

“The only reasonable course of action for the EU now is to answer the expectations of citizens in Albania and North Macedonia. These expectations are of a European future.”

Elsewhere, former EU commissioner László Andor, now secretary general of FEPS, the Foundation for European Progressive Studies, said, “The failure to move Albania and North-Macedonia into EU accession candidate status last October made the governments and the citizens of these two countries pretty upset.”

“Friends of enlargement were appalled by the perceived arrogance and ignorance of France and the other non-supporters of the case.”

Meanwhile, the EU has been told it must show “solidarity” with Western Balkans states during the ongoing Coronavirus crisis.

S&D vice-president responsible for foreign affairs, Kati Piri, said, “Like everywhere in Europe, the number of confirmed cases of the Coronavirus in the countries of the Western Balkans continues to rise. We are in it together. The virus does not know borders or nationalities. If we want to effectively fight Coronavirus, we must not forget about countries in the middle of Europe.”

“As Socialists and Democrats, we urge the European Commission and the Member States to include
the Western Balkan countries in our common European response, and in measures to prevent and combat the effects of the epidemic.”

About the author

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