



Weekly Briefing

**Albania external relations briefing:
EU's footprint in the Western Balkans in 2021: the
Albanian case**
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EU's footprint in the Western Balkans in 2021: the Albanian case

Summary

This year has demonstrated to the Albanian people where they truly stand, in their relations with the European Union (EU). If for some time the narrative has tried to sugarcoat the facts, currently the official discourse is very clear. While analyzing the relation within European nations Flemings (2000) argues that the simultaneous proximity and distance of the Balkans - the point of reference, being Western Europe - had the sense that they somehow constitute the “*outsider within.*” This outsider within the continent, is currently given a proper outsider treatment.

This briefing is an overview of what the (EU) integration process for Albania looks like in 2021.

Introduction

The Western Balkan countries went in the summit of Brno (Slovenia) with the intentions of seeking reassurances from the EU, as they met to discuss about their eventual acceptance into the bloc. Member states took the opportunity to display issues of foreign policy, following the fallout from the Afghanistan withdrawal. But much of their deliberations was focused on “calming the nerves” of Western Balkan nations, who have been waiting for years to be accepted into the EU. Talks of expanding the union have recently stalled. Unfortunately, some EU members are cautious about Albania's membership.

A diplomatic charm-offensive from Ursula von der Leyen in Tirana

A few days before the October summit of the European Union with the Western Balkans, Albania was promised another date for holding the first intergovernmental conference. The President of the European Commission, Ursula Von Der Leyen, set as the next deadline the end of 2021, as the year when Albania and the EU will sit at the same table to formalize the start of membership negotiations.

She shared her message via Twitter saying: “*Delighted to start my visit to the Western Balkans in Albania.*”

My message is clear: Albania's future is in the EU ...we share a common, European

future.”¹ Her visit included meeting with the PM and the President of the Republic. After underlining that Albania has met the conditions set by the EU, Ursula Von Der Leyen did not say whether this will serve the country to start negotiations alone, as long as Bulgaria does not give up its veto on Northern Macedonia. Any initiative, she reiterated, which essentially has the Berlin Process as one of the main goals and the creation of a common regional market is welcomed. In Albania this was portrayed as an endorsement for the “Open Balkans” initiative, however no word in that regard was uttered.

The focus on the analysts in Albania was mainly directed to what the President of the Commission would state on the upcoming EU-Western Balkans conference in Slovenia. Von Der Leyen declared in the presence of the Albanian PM that she fully supported moving forward on the accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia as soon as possible. “But trust me, I really am determined to make it happen, that we have our first Intergovernmental Conference, so that we can start the accession talks.” – she stated.²

After von der Leyen left Albania, another information hit the news cycle, the phone call between her and the United States (US) President Joe Biden, where it was made public by the White House that the leaders [also] discussed the Western Balkans, and President Biden conveyed strong support for continuing the accession process with countries in this region.³ In the Albanian public opinion this was presented as a true good news that also absorbed some headlines and streams of optimism.⁴ On the other hand, to summarize the situation, foreign media would state that her visit in the Balkans entailed “Nice promises, but no clear message” considering that concrete membership talks are not yet on the horizon.⁵

Brdo: EU-Western Balkans summit on accession

On October 6th, EU and Western Balkan leaders wrapped up a one-day summit in Brdo, Slovenia with promises for greater integration but didn't commit to a solid timeline for the six

¹ Twitter, Ursula von der Leyen @vonderleyen (2021, October 28). Full text available at <https://twitter.com/vonderleyen/status/1442733263345393665> and <https://twitter.com/vonderleyen/status/1442752766636666883>

² European Commission, Press release (2021, September 28). Statement by President von der Leyen on the occasion of her official visit to Albania. Available at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/STATEMENT_21_4911

³ The White House, Briefing Room (2021, October 4). Readout of Joseph R. Biden, Jr.'s Call with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. Available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/10/04/readout-of-joseph-r-biden-jr-s-call-with-european-commission-president-ursula-von-der-leyen/>

⁴ Gazeta Sot (2021, October 8). GOOD NEWS! Joe Biden calls Von Der Leyen, here is what he says about the Western Balkans EU integration process. Available at <https://sot.com.al/english/aktualitet/lajm-i-mir-joe-biden-telefonon-von-der-leyen-ja-cfare-i-thote-per-pro-i467303>

⁵ Riegert, B. (2021, October 1). Von der Leyen në Ballkan: Premtime të bukura, por asnjë mesazh të qartë. Available at <https://www.dw.com/sq/von-der-leyen-n%C3%AB-ballkan-premtime-t%C3%AB-bukura-por-asnj%C3%AB-mesazh-t%C3%AB-qart%C3%AB/a-59372082>

countries to join the 27-member bloc. The EU's executive branch (the Commission) is paralyzed by leaders of the EU's national governments, all of whom possess a veto option on opening negotiations. Recent focus remains on Albania and North Macedonia which have met reform demands from the EU and are expecting to be invited to a formal conference to launch their accession negotiations. The late stet blockade comes from Bulgaria exercising its veto over a longstanding dispute with North Macedonia about culture and language. ⁶

What truly was surprising and almost unbelievable for Albanians, this time around was the attitude of Germany. German Chancellor, Angela Merkel said she doesn't support creating a firm timeline to open talks. She rejected calls to set a date for the accession of Western Balkans countries into the European Union. To her, once the conditions are met the accession can take place. Clarifying that a deadline would put the EU under pressure, no matter if Western Balkans fulfilled the conditions set out by the 27-nation bloc or not. ⁷ Just as Merkel is leaving her chancellor position, this declaration appears to be on the reverse if compared with her stance of the past years. Indeed, in Albania Merkel has been always perceived as one of the EU leaders that strongly supported the Western Balkans integration process.

Again, as in the past, the EU demands stringent reforms on justice, press freedom and the fights against corruption and organized crime. France is also reluctant for the EU to grow in number, with Brussels already accusing member states like Poland and Hungary of breaching democratic values. Ahead of the meeting, Albanian PM Edi Rama blamed the EU's internal fights for the holdup in talks. He stated prior to the meeting that he “learned the hard way not to expect anything.”

Internally there was another issue that attracted attention in Albania and somehow, it triggered more waves of suspicions in the very process of integration. A report from news and current affairs portal Politico, claimed that the EU Enlargement Commissioner, Oliver Varhelyi (from Hungary) has been watering down judicial and democratic demands on Serbia during its accession process. The article names it the “Belgrade’s booster” claiming that the Hungarian commissioner has made clear to his own staff that he wants to boost Belgrade’s campaign for EU membership. According to two Commission officials, Várhelyi’s cabinet upgraded the assessment of Serbia to give a more positive view of rule-of-law issues in this year’s draft enlargement report, which reviews candidate countries’ progress and is currently

⁶ Parrock, J. (2021, October 6). EU summit: No firm timeline for Western Balkans accession. Available at <https://www.dw.com/en/eu-summit-no-firm-timeline-for-western-balkans-accession/a-59429164>

⁷ Siebold, S. & Carrel, P. (2021, October 6). EU should not set date for enlargement on Western Balkans, Merkel says. *Reuters*. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-should-not-set-date-enlargement-western-balkans-merkel-says-2021-10-06/>

being prepared.⁸

However, the most discouraging of all news coming from Slovenia was that the Union's 27 leaders (although they promised future membership to their six Balkan neighbors) brushed aside calls for a 2030 goal for fear of a backlash at home over migration.⁹ On the other hand, even though they did not reach an agreement amongst them, they were swift to point out threats. Austrian Chancellor, Sebastian Kurz stated that if the European Union does not offer this region a real perspective, EU has to be aware that other superpowers - China, Russia or Turkey - will play a bigger role in the area. Kurz concludes that the region belongs to Europe geographically, and it needs a European perspective.¹⁰

What is there left to do?

First and foremost, many in the country are calling it the summit of the faded hopes. The fact that Albania is at a crossroad with the EU is not new; what is new is the fact that now the member states are not even trying to display a good will and essentially disregarded anything they have promised 18 years ago (2003, the Thessaloniki agreement).

Former Albanian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Paskal Milo, would go even further as to state that this is not only a bump in the road, but a true setback. He analyzed the final statement of the Summit where for the first time the candidate countries were not labeled as such [candidates] but as “partners”. For Milo this was the most regrettable of all because for the first time in decades there is course reverse. To the former minister, this is something that does not only represent the official discourse of the EU, but the true intention for the future. It represents the core of the EU members thinking - he argues - with regards to the Western Balkans. A partner can be also a nation outside Europe, but a Candidate Country institutionally should mean something more.¹¹

Conclusion

What this Summit has caused, is a dissatisfaction of both domestic and foreign (EU) leaderships. Albanians were aware of the fact that the process would not be short, but after two decades of promises having a course reverse, surely triggers some feelings. It was known

⁸ Barigazzi, J. & Gray, A. (2021, October 5). Olivér Várhelyi: Europe's under-fire gatekeeper. *Politico*. Available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/oliver-varhelyi-eu-commissioner-enlargement-western-balkans-serbia-human-rights-democracy-rule-of-law/>

⁹ Siebold, S. Sekularac, i. & Emmott, R. (2021, October 6). EU restates Balkan membership guarantee but won't say for when. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/despite-french-push-eu-leaders-divided-over-common-defence-strategy-2021-10-06/>

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Milo, P. (2021, October 7). Samiti i Brdo-Brijunit, Shqipëria hapa mbrapa per Integrimin. ABC News Albania, ABC Live [min. 41:10]. Available at <https://abcnews.al/perplasja-ne-pd-milo-nese-arrijne-marveshje-forcohet-partia-mustafaj-berisha-dhe-kadilli-skane-qellim-force-te-re/>

in deeds, but it was not made public in words.

Albanian people have strived to reach the EU because it represent the standards they want to achieve; Albanian businesses have started conforming to EU regulations since 2009. Albanian politicians one after the other have promised EU integration. And in 2021, it is being said not even to mention a date. Historically the developments in the Albania and Western Balkans, have depended from coincidence of two-dimensional dynamics, so the dynamics inside and from the outside. For the moment, the dynamics from the outside (EU) are being everything but dynamic. One more decade to wait!