

Report

Webinar: EU Enlargement after another turbulent year – how can the process be enhanced by the EU Member States

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The year of 2020 gave the EU Enlargement agenda fresh impulses that have a potential to speed up the process of the accession to the EU. By the adoption of the new methodology, the EU Commission reacted swiftly to a French veto which effectively blocked the start of accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania in fall of 2019. Significant progress in reforming the methodology used to judge to progress a candidate country has made in their reform programmes and adoption of the *acquis* was praised by various actors. However, the progress has seemingly hit a wall at the end of 2020 when Bulgaria decided to veto the adoption of the framework of the accession talks due to historical disputes with North Macedonia. This veto is yet another example of one Member State using unanimity voting in this area of EU Foreign Policy for domestic agenda.

Possibility of a qualified majority voting in the EU Enlargement process, the effects of the new methodology, future developments and question on what needs to be changed were all topics of the webinar *EU Enlargement after another turbulent year – how can the process be enhanced by the EU Member States*, organized on 14th of January 2021 by the Brussels Office of EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy, with guest speakers **Jana Juzová**, a Research Fellow at EUROPEUM, and **Zoran Nechev**, a Research Fellow at Institute for Democracy Societas Civilis Skopje (IDSCS). The discussion was moderated by **Žiga Faktor**, Head of Brussels Office of EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy.

Our guests agreed that the new methodology might be a good thing in that it prevents backsliding in a country's reform process and deterioration of rule of law or respect for human rights by enabling the EU to re-open already closed chapters. Though when used properly the new methodology could speed the process significantly, there is also risk of bigger political misuse as the EU Member States are more involved and only one of them can block the whole process.

That is what our guests see happening currently in regard to the Bulgarian veto. The country decided to use the questions of language and identity, along

with shared history, as grounds to block the talks with North Macedonia, even though this topics aren't subject to the Enlargement process and the dangerous precedent this could be sending, especially given the specifics of the Balkan region. Our speakers expressed their surprise at Bulgaria being able to stall the talks alone, without much opposition from other EU members, like Germany, then the presiding country of the EU Council, or France, who had declared their intention to focus more on the region. The only opposition came from the Czech Republic and Slovakia, that officially opposed the Council conclusions, though the two countries alone are unlikely to change something alone. The guests expect that future development in the process can be better shaped by the priorities of upcoming EU Council presidencies. Presidency to the EU Council should act as a positive tool through which EU Member States can better enhance the EU Enlargement process. Thus, upcoming Slovenian, French and Czech presidencies signifying some hope in this aspect.

The new methodology however also impacts the countries already in the process of accession talks. Serbia and Montenegro both indicated they are willing to follow the new framework, but haven't been yet informed by the Commission what this process should look like. This situation can further delay the accession of two countries, which by the 2020 progress reports of the candidate countries is already behind the schedule with a limited progress in the recent years.

Finally, the debate also touched upon the topic of the various elections in the Western Balkans and their impact on the agenda of EU Enlargement. The case of Montenegro is especially interesting for the EU, as their recent elections on one hand signified the first democratic transition of power since the end of communism in the country. On the other hand, the outcome is a governing coalition of many different parties, some of which are opposing the euro-atlantic direction of Montenegro and are significantly pro-Russian. For now, it seems the coalition is willing to follow on the path of the previous government, but this is surely one aspect to watch closely when talking about the efforts towards further EU integration in the region.



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Speakers at the discussion agreed, that the year 2020 can act as a stepping stone for candidate countries, which can by the adoption of the new methodology speed up the process. At the same time, the accession process should not be used as a platform for solving bilateral disputes, such is the case of current Bulgarian veto. Adoption of qualified majority voting in the area of EU Enlargement would prevent such situations in the future and provide a fairer evaluation of the progress of candidate countries.



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EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy is a non-profit, non-partisan, and independent think-tank focusing on European integration and cohesion. EUROPEUM contributes to democracy, security, stability, freedom, and solidarity across Europe as well as to active engagement of the Czech Republic in the European Union. EUROPEUM undertakes original research, organizes public events and educational activities, and formulates new ideas and recommendations to improve European and Czech policy making.

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About EUROPEUM in Brussels

Building on a long history of EUROPEUM in Prague, we opened our office in Brussels in January 2016. EUROPEUM has been the first think-tank from the Central Europe to branch out to the heart of the European Union. Our motivation has been to follow the debates on EU policies and politics from close and to contribute to them by strengthening the voice of the Czech Republic and other central and east European countries. At the same time, we would like to use our Brussels presence to boost discussions on the EU back in the region, through introducing research by Brussels-based experts, offering their perspective at local events, cooperating with the media, etc.

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