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EXPERT COMMENT

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What does the veto on opening talks with Albania and North Macedonia mean for the European aspirations of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine?

On October 15, EU ministers failed to agree to start the talks that could lead to Albania and North Macedonia joining the EU. While a handful of countries opposed the process with respect to Albania, only France vetoed opening talks with North Macedonia. After the meeting, France found itself in the spotlight as the only country that vetoed starting talks with both countries. The day after the meeting, French President Emmanuel Macron referred to the system for accepting new members as “bizarre” and called for reforming the procedure.

EU countries' reluctance to further enlargement has significant implications for Georgia as well as for the whole EaP region. At least three new Eastern European states – Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine – aspire to EU membership or at least for some form of European perspective that goes beyond the neighborhood policy format. However, these countries' commitment to align themselves with Europe is not equally enthusiastically shared by the EU. The recent veto on starting talks with the two Balkan countries further exacerbates the already existing mismatch between Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine and the EU regarding the countries' membership perspective.

At the request of the Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP), a selection of experts from Germany, France, Estonia, and Georgia responded to the following questions:

- **What does the veto on opening talks with Albania and North Macedonia mean for the European aspirations of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine and how can the EU maintain credibility in its Eastern neighborhood?**
- **What can the governments of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine do in the meantime to maintain the reform drive and pro-EU mood in their countries considering the enlargement fatigue and lack of new initiatives on the EU's side?**

DR. THOMAS RISSE - *Professor of International Relations at the Otto Suhr Institute of Political Science, and Dean of the Department of Political and Social Sciences, Freie Universität Berlin*

The decision by the EU Council on October 15 not to open accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia has potentially catastrophic consequences for the Western Balkans. As a result of the Balkan wars of the 1990s, the EU has offered a membership perspective to the countries of the Western Balkans as its main “carrot” to foster regional peace and stability. Reneging on this commitment now when two countries have fulfilled all necessary conditions for accession negotiations implies that the EU’s commitments cannot be trusted. It also means that the EU has little leeway in geostrategic terms to counter Russian (and Chinese) efforts to extend their spheres of influence to the Western Balkans. One can only hope that the new Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, makes good on her promise to seek a reversal of the Council decision as soon as possible.

As to the repercussions for the EaP countries Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, the EU has been vague on a membership perspective for quite some time. On the one hand, the EU and important member states continue to name these countries – including Georgia – “European” countries (cf. German Federal President Steinmeier’s recent visit in Tbilisi) which by definition offers a membership perspective to the EaP countries in legal terms. On the other hand, the EU has made little effort at accommodating the European aspirations of the three countries. The recent decision on the Western Balkans only adds to these ambiguities – with potentially dire consequences as to the geostrategic implications. What can be done? One can only recommend to

countries like Georgia to continue following its European aspirations and, thus, to slowly but surely “entrap” the EU in its own rhetoric. After all, research has shown that “rhetorical entrapment” was a major reason why the Central East European countries were offered membership rather early on after the end of the Cold War (e.g. Schimmelfennig’s work). Of course, EaP countries such as Georgia have to continue on the path toward liberal democratic polities (Copenhagen criteria!) in order to retain a membership perspective. Since the EU has survived its recent crises, including the upcoming Brexit, reasonably well, it can start operating beyond crisis mode now. As a result, I do not consider discussions on further Eastern enlargements out of the question. But first, of course, the decision on Albania and North Macedonia has to be reversed.

DR. LAURE DELCOUR - *Associate Professor, University Paris 3 - Sorbonne nouvelle.*

This veto is a clear signal that some EU member states are very reluctant to further enlarge the EU using the current methods and process. In countries such as France, this reluctance is both deeply entrenched and long-standing. France is dissatisfied with the way in which the enlargement process is handled and it has kept prioritizing the deepening of EU integration. The French veto, if maintained, could undermine EU credibility in the Balkans. This is because the Western Balkans have clearly been offered a European perspective. What makes the French veto look even worse is that the EU explicitly linked the opening of talks with North Macedonia to the conclusion of an agreement with Greece – which was reached in February.

However, France has just circulated a new set of proposals on how to reform the enlargement

process. What France suggests is a phased approach, which would see the gradual integration (in seven steps) of candidate countries in EU policies and programs subject to effective reforms in selected areas, and their full integration once all the steps are completed. The recent French proposals could—if agreed upon within the EU, which has yet to be done—give a new impetus to the enlargement policy, which has been criticized in recent years for being too technocratic and failing to produce any deep transformative effects on such core issues as the rule of law and fundamental rights (defined as the first step in the French proposals).

Beyond the Balkans, the French proposals may be of interest to Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine as well, given the lack of a clear Eastern Partnership finalité and the need for stronger incentives.

Sustaining the political momentum for reforms in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine is a major challenge given the current absence of a membership perspective. To be sure, with the Association Agreement/DCFTA Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have taken on board an unprecedented agenda for reforms and their implementation will require time. However, it will be extremely difficult to maintain the reform drive if the EU does not offer new perspectives (whatever their form may be) to the associated countries. Perhaps paradoxically, the phased approach to enlargement suggested by France might provide a new impetus to the relationship between the EU and the three associated countries. It could at least help prioritize the reforms required from the partner countries and—if the EU agrees to this approach and its application to the associated countries—offer new perspectives for their selective, gradual or full integration with the EU.

DR. EIKI BERG - Professor of International Relations at the University of Tartu, Estonia.

The issue of enlargement can be seen from different angles. It is not only the question whether there are potential candidate states that qualify with membership criteria; it is also about the EU's capacity to absorb the new member states, provided that what has been created during the course of integration will be not washed away by the new wave of enlargement. In order to safeguard previous achievements—the single market, Schengen visa-free space, euro zone—there is a call for further reforms, which actually touch upon the institutional mechanisms and decision-making on the EU level, thus eroding even more of the sovereignty that the member states today have. This means “no” to the reform ideas, and consequently also “no” to the further enlargements.

While being aware of this “enlargement-reform” dilemma, the EU (as a supranational body) keeps pushing towards further enlargements. Because if it does not do this, it might leave an impression that integration as a process/EU as a moving target has reached the final stage after which disintegration will follow. The EU (as an intergovernmental body), on the other hand, keeps blocking everything that might remind the constituencies of individual member states about “enlargement fatigue.” If these tensions prevail, there is no reason to expect new enlargements to occur in a foreseeable future.

This all produces negative outcomes: the EU is giving out promises which it is not able to deliver. In this way the EU loses credibility and capacity to drive the reform processes in its neighborhood. Sticks without carrots do not appeal to potential candidates—reform for the sake of your own good does not contain enough incentives. The questions of how can the EU maintain credibility in its Eastern neighborhood, and how the

governments of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia can maintain the reform drive and pro-EU sentiments, are equally justified.

Perhaps it is time for the EU decision-makers and the governments of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia to come to terms that:

a) For the EU, failure to deliver and consequent credibility loss does more harm to its image than facing the reality and slowing down the enlargement process. The EU should continue integration “in all but institutions,” and in a way that the governments of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia can continue reforms, and the people of these countries can feel that this improves their everyday life. There should be a good balance between the demand side (sticks) and benefits (carrots). In the EU’s reform agenda, penetration into the field of moral values before other materially promising initiatives can kick off is not a good start.

b) For the governments of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, disappointment does more harm to commitment to the reformist track than lowering the expectations side. One shouldn’t exploit the EU integration perspective for political gains: no matter how much the countries try to demonstrate their allegiance to the European course, membership may remain unachievable. The reform drive can still be sustained when ordinary people feel the benefits coming from visa-free travelling, free trade regime, established rule of law and the democratization of political regimes. If that matters, then reformists can gain legitimacy in the eyes of their people even without promising something which is not in their hands.

DR. SERGI KAPANADZE - Professor of International Relations at Ilia State University.

The veto by France to open talks with Albania and North Macedonia does not directly affect Georgia, or further Eastern Partnership. However it can have a medium to long-term chilling effect on the appetite of the EU MS to deepen the integration process with Georgia and other Eastern Partnership countries. The real problem with the current status quo of the EaP is that the partnership has exhausted its instruments. Association Agreements and DCFTAs will continue to be implemented and the visa free status will remain, even if the number of migrants from EaP states increases over the next few years. This creates a vacuum for further integration steps. EaP states would like to see the EaP transform into an accession platform, with more accession instruments and increased financial assistance. However, Macron’s veto means that no European Council will make that political decision in the nearest future. The second potential problem with Macron’s “non” is that it will have a cooling effect on an idea that EaP states have had for a few years now—launching Membership applications and then using diplomacy and patience to persuade EU MS and institutions to wait for the right time to open the accession talks. This potential joint effort among Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova appears to be all but irrelevant now, with EU’s increased skepticism—as well as the takeover of the government in Moldova by the pro-Russian ruling party.

In the meantime, EaP states need to show the EU that their commitment to the European course is serious. Two major, interlinked challenges remain: first, the state of democracy, and second—the influence of Russia. Moldova overthrew its oligarch, but only through the concerted effort of pro-European and pro-Russian

forces. This short-lived marriage ended, however, in the strengthening of the Russian vector and the pro-European party's eventual loss of cabinet posts. In Georgia, oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili finds himself in a series of crises of his own making. The dispersal of an anti-occupation rally, the promise of the proportional elections and the promotion of the interior minister who was responsible for the violent dispersal of the rally, followed by backtracking on that same promised electoral reform has radicalized Georgian politics and closed avenues for dialogue among the parties. Meanwhile, pro-Russian forces have become stronger and will attempt to be kingmakers in the 2020 elections. Ukraine still struggles with corruption, despite the drive of the new president and the cabinet. There, also, pro-Russian forces are strong and are waiting for the chance to influence politics, just as they did a few

years ago. A clear democracy course and isolation of the pro-Russian narratives and forces could be one way to attract more EU to the EaP states. This, however, is not currently on the agenda of any of the EaP states. What the EU could do in this situation is another issue. The EU could certainly encourage more reforms, through conditionality and political pressure. Naming and shaming is a tool, which the EU has constantly underused in the last few years. But, since leadership on the EaP region is non-existent in the EU, it is highly likely that the current status quo will continue, and it will become even more troubling thanks to the increased enlargement fatigue in the EU.

Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP) is a Tbilisi-based non-profit, non-partisan, research and analysis organization. GIP works to strengthen the organizational backbone of democratic institutions and promote good governance and development through policy research and advocacy in Georgia.

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