EU HEADLINES

NATIONAL PERSPECTIVES OF EUROPEAN DEBATES

Gaining ground

The presentation of the European Commission's 2023 Enlargement Package marks a new stage in the EU membership aspirations for Ukraine, Moldova, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Georgia. Along with the Western Balkan states, all candidates are encouraged to step up reforms in the key areas of justice, rule of law, corruption and freedom of expression.

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Spinning wheels

The enlargement wheels are spinning at last as the European Commission issued a recommendation to open accession negotiations with Ukraine, Moldova, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, once the latter "achieves the necessary level of compliance with the criteria for membership." Conditional to the implementation of required reforms but backed by the evidence of substantial progress, the final decisions will have to be agreed upon by consensus among all Member States during the European Council on December 14-15. Assessing the catch that came with the Bosnian case, *Novi List* reports predictably varied reactions from the country, including cautious hope that the March 2024 reassessment deadline would give a much-needed push for the stagnant progress of achieving the 14 priorities prescribed by the Commission in 2019. Although the Enlargement Package includes a recommendation to grant candidate status to Georgia, Ursula von der Leyen stressed that the European integration aspirations of Georgian citizens and pro-EU President Salome Zurabishvili must be better reflected in the work of the Georgian government to enable further steps in the accession process.

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Yes, but

During the presentation of the 2023 Enlargement Package and the new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, Ursula von der Leyen declared the EU doors wide open for Bosnia and Herzegovina, hinging on the country's ability to step over the required reform threshold. The Commission noted progress in Bosnia's fight against organised crime and money laundering after the country was granted a conditional candidate status in 2022, against the backdrop of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but concluded that only five out of eight key priorities were fulfilled while backsliding was recorded for some. Taking stock of the political and legislative developments, country-specific reports send a similar message of combined praise and call to further action in the areas of justice, rule of law, corruption, and freedom of expression to Albania, Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Kosovo. Without notable exceptions, reports *Balkan Insight*, freedom of expression remains an area of increased concern for the Balkan Five due to little or nothing done to better protect journalists, increase the transparency, independence, pluralism, and quality of the media. Similarly, insubstantial advances in reinforcing the judicial system, which for example in Montenegro "is facing a deep institutional crisis", hinder the implementation of the anti-corruption and crime-combating initiatives.

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Going cold Turkey

Cyprus newspaper *Phileneus* zooms in on the European Commission report on Turkey's accession process. The article calls the assessment "devastating" for Turkey, as it contains references to Ankara's aggressive policy in Cyprus as well as the attitude of the Turkish president towards Hamas after the 7 October terrorist attack against Israel. The Commission's text emphasises the importance of Turkey committing to the negotiations for a fair, comprehensive, and sustainable settlement of the Cyprus situation. The report mentions Turkey "continuing the militarisation of the occupied territory" and reference is made to the fact that Turkey "repeatedly supported the two-state solution in Cyprus", contrary to the relevant UN resolutions. Turkey also continuously refused to recognise the Republic of Cyprus. The report underlines that the EU expects Turkey "to actively support the negotiations" for a solution "within the framework of the United Nations". The conclusions emphasise the importance of Turkey restating "its commitment to the process led by the UN for a settlement in Cyprus". In relation to migration, Turkey is called upon to comply with its commitments based on the EU-Turkey agreement of 2016.

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You get what you give

On a highly symbolic anniversary of the 2013 Revolution of Dignity, also known as Euromaidan pro-European protests in Ukraine, the European Commission presented a long-awaited report and issued a recommendation to the European Council to formally open the accession negotiations, reports *Kurier*. Although the assessment of Ukraine's reform progress is largely positive, for the European Council to turn over a new leaf in the accession process during the December 14-15 meeting, the country needs to show consistent advancement towards the EU-required milestones. Particularly, Kyiv is expected to step up the fight against corruption and money laundering, further improve the procedure for appointing judges for the Constitutional Court and ensure an effective implementation of the adopted legislation. Following Ursula von der Leyen's visit on November 4, President Zelensky reaffirmed Ukraine's commitment to adopting necessary changes en route to the coveted EU membership and assured that "next steps" are already underway in the Ukrainian Parliament.

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