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Macron: another lost occasion for the Balkans

At the recent EU-Balkans summit, hosted by Poland, the Franco-German divergence about enlargement emerged again. In Poznan, the dynamic town in Central Poland where European leaders met Balkan heads of state and government on the 3-5th of July, the French President Emmanuel Macron told once more that any further enlargement should be pursued only after a comprehensive reform of the European governance. He thinks that EU territorial expansion would leave decision-making even more unwieldy. For him, a larger Europe means more vetoes and much slower changes. Likely, this is the reason why he forced the EU Council to postpone the opening of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia, already recommended by the Commission. Holland backed France.

The German chancellor Angela Merkel agrees with Macron about the need to give the EU better and faster decisional mechanisms but has another view on Western Balkans. “As we know, the accession process lasts very long, and we have enough time to re-evaluate our own cooperation”, she emphasized.

The Polish President Andrzej Duda, the host of the summit, echoed Merkel. The Balkan countries should not be asked to participate in a race «where they cannot see the finish line», he said.

Poland and other members of the so-called Visegrad Group (Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia) support the EU enlargement to the Western Balkans, but they also are the main problem in the EU, at least for Macron, because they oppose any federative development in the EU, advocate non-liberal values and block the decision-making process, if not aligned with their interests. V4 countries are an obstacle for strengthening Europe’s role in immigration sphere, but also for curbing emissions, for example. Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary recently vetoed an ambitious package that if approved would have cut CO2 emission to zero by 2050 in Europe. Poland and Czech Republic, still very dependent on coal, told that for them respecting the EU roadmap is impossible, unless being hugely funded to convert their economies. Hungary is not coal-hungry anymore, but supports the neighbours claim.

Negotiations to appoint the new President of the European Commission strengthened Macron's view about the V4, which took the most hawkish posture among countries that shelved the candidature of Frans Timmermans, a progressive Dutch politician who has served as vicepresident of the Commission in the last five years. For Paris and Berlin, he, and not Ursula von der Leyen, was the best choice for the EU top job. However, the V4 opposed Timmermans, arguing that he has used his rule of law portfolio in the Commission as a stick to hit Central Europe. Any recommendations he has made to avoid reforms not in line with the EU principles – for example, justice reforms in Poland and Hungary – have been perceived by the V4 as an attempt to interfere in domestic affairs.

As *The Economist* remarked in one of its latest editions, “as the leaders of Hungary and Poland attack the independence of their judiciaries it seems quaint to argue that negotiating membership would instil democratic habits in countries with long memories of dictatorship”. Macron shares this concern. He thinks that the Balkan Six are still very vulnerable democracies, very exposed to authoritarian trends. Hence, enlargement can wait.

Macron eyes also the French public opinion, and this should not be underestimated. Enlargement is not very popular in France. “It brings back memories of the 2005 campaign for the referendum on the European Constitution, which was massively rejected, during which enlargement to Turkey and the ‘Polish plumber’ as a personification of the 2004 wave of enlargement were among the main topics”, the French political analyst Loic Tregoures recalled in an op-ed he wrote for Balkan Insight, explaining Macron’s “bad cop” role.

Such attitude is unjust, wrote Wolfgang Ischinger, a German diplomat, in a comment posted by *The Politico*: “If the EU can’t offer a credible path to accession, it will lose any leverage it has in the region. Conditions, to be sure, have to be strict. But they also have to be fair: when countries fulfil the criteria set by the EU, they should not be held back by domestic considerations in national capitals», thinks Ischinger, who served as the European negotiator in Bosnia and Kosovo crisis. This is also Merkel’s view. Anyway, considering that Angela Merkel’s star is fading, it is difficult for her to convince Macron that reforming Europe and enlarging Europe are compatible challenges.

Meanwhile, the French President is due to visit Serbia in mid-July. In the last 18 years, no French head of State has made a trip to Belgrade. At least, it means that Paris does understand that it has to commit in the Western Balkans, to play a role on the ground. Over the last years, it has not been so active in the region, as confirmed by its glaring absence in NATO’s KFOR (Kosovo Force) since 2014.

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