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Macron's tough love for the Balkans

At a recent EU Council, the French President, Emmanuel Macron vetoed the opening of EU accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia, as suggested to the Council by the EU Commission.

Macron's *non*, somehow expected, depends on French internal political situation (immigration and EU enlargement are an issue of concern for citizens), as well as on governance in Europe. He believes that before expanding further its borders, the EU needs a profound rethinking of its decisional mechanisms. The French veto is clearly connected to Macron's European ambitions, too. He wants to emerge as the leader of the bloc, succeeding the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who is serving her fourth and last term. In spring, he launched a manifesto for Europe's future. Yet, it has not sparked big enthusiasm. Observers speculate that sinking Albania and North Macedonia's European hopes, supported by all the EU members, exception made for France, could be interpreted as a tit for tat for the lukewarm reception of the manifesto.

To move closer to the EU, Tirana approved a deep reform of the judiciary. Implementation was slow, but it should not be forgotten that the vetting of judges (the main pillar of the reform) is a very sensitive issue in a country that still faces the burden of the most brutal and paranoid dictatorship among all others in the former Eastern Communist bloc.

North Macedonia's effort to close the gap with Europe was even more forceful. The Prime Minister, Zoran Zaev, has survived several challenges, like nationalism and foreign meddling, to solve the naming dispute with Greece, the historic hurdle on the path to Euro-Atlantic integration.

Macron's veto ignites frustration in the two countries and in the rest of the region. Zaev felt the necessity to call early elections the 12th of April 2020 due to the French veto. Disappointed by Europe's enlargement fatigue, stemmed only by Angela Merkel during the last years, the Western Balkans might forge closer ties with Turkey, China and Russia, whose appetites in the region are growing, despite their questionable democratic standards. Since Macron showed that accession talks can be sunk at any

moment, even if EU requirements are on the path of fulfillment, increasing cooperation with Beijing, Moscow and Turkey might not seem anymore a big issue for the Balkan Six at least until some concrete opening from the EU is visible.

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