



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

The EU-Balkans summit - acceleration of an unfinished integration under the influence of Ukraine



The European Union has been searching for a way to absorb the turbulent Western Balkans region more quickly and efficiently after 20 years since it committed to admitting it as a member.

The meeting of the Western Balkans leaders and the EU in Athens would have been more or less ceremonial if the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, had not been included in the talks.

The summit served as a reminder of the 2003 Thessaloniki summit when the EU opened the door to membership of the Balkan states, which had just emerged from the war conflicts in the 1990s.

But the process has not brought great success in the past 2 decades, so only one country from the region, Croatia, has joined the EU, in 2013.

Russia's aggression against Ukraine accelerated not only Kyiv's move towards EU membership and its application for membership last year but also sounded an alarm in Brussels to speed up expansion into the Balkans, as a somewhat forgotten zone still burdened by the legacy of conflict and the strong influence of Russia.

Expansion of the EU candidate club

The summit in Athens was supposed to show the EU's determination to continue with enlargement, which has been non-existent for 10 years, and include Ukraine and Moldova in the accelerated process in addition to the Western Balkans.

“[The] Western Balkans, Ukraine and Moldova have a common European heritage, history and future. Enlargement remains a top priority for the EU - a strong tool to foster peace, security and prosperity on our continent. We

need to find the way forward to make this vision of Europe a reality”, said Charles Michel, President of the European Council in Athens.

Balkan countries are far from each other regarding progress towards EU membership. While Montenegro and Serbia are near the end of the negotiation process, others are still at the beginning (Bosnia and Herzegovina). Kosovo still does not have full recognition of 5 out of the 27 bloc members.

Ukraine and Moldova are at the very beginning of the multi-year accession process. These countries were not even considered potential members before Russian aggression.

However, the EU leadership treated the Balkans, Ukraine, and Moldova equally in Athens, as a package that should be encouraged to join the bloc.

According to the plan presented by Mr Michel and the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, accession will be accelerated, through certain stages, starting with integration into the single market.

Working against the influence of Russia and China

The Western Balkan region lags behind the EU economically. The total economy of its 6 states is the size of Slovakia or one-third of Romania (about \$112 billion, OECD), and the population is the size of the Netherlands (about 17.5 million).

From that point of view, the EU could easily absorb this area. But, its conflict legacy and particularly the still strong influence of Russia and China are challenging. This influence has been getting stronger and using the Union's reluctance to integrate the region more decisively.

Therefore, the presence of Volodymyr Zelensky at the Balkans and the EU summit in Athens shows the intention of Brussels to use the Ukrainian crisis and speed up the integration of both, and thus permanently remove them from the zone of the destructive influence of Russia and China.

Zelensky's meeting with the Balkan leaders is somewhat different from his rare visits abroad, where he usually meets the leaders of major Western allies.

He arrived in Athens after visiting the Netherlands and Denmark, which will lead the F16 aircraft delivery operation and the training of Ukrainian pilots.

However, Zelensky has recently announced that he will continue talks with European partners, particularly those who still have certain reservations and dilemmas regarding Ukrainian defence and the relationship with Russia.

Pragmatic distancing of Serbia from Russia

Zelensky's conversation with the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić in the margins of the Athens summit was particularly noteworthy. Vučić deviated from the policy of 100% compliance with the EU, which rules in the region because he has not yet imposed sanctions on Russia.

However, based on their statements, Zelensky and Vučić had a good conversation. They found shared points in the same desire to join the EU, but also in respecting the principle of territorial integrity of states because both Ukraine and Serbia have territorial problems.

The first is Russia and its occupation of the area in the east of Ukraine, and the state independence of Kosovo, which Serbia does not recognise, referring to international

documents that guarantee the integrity of independent states.

Serbia has repeatedly voted in international fora, including the UN, for resolutions condemning Russian aggression against Ukraine, expressing support for its territorial integrity.

It did the same in Athens, joining a declaration supporting the sovereignty of Ukraine, condemning the Russian invasion and demanding punishment of those responsible for civilian casualties and destruction.

This is Zelensky's second meeting with the President of Serbia in just a few months, while Vučić has not met with President Putin, whom he has often met before, since the start of the Russian invasion.

Even though it has not yet introduced economic sanctions against Russia, Serbia has been visibly escaping from the traditional Russian embrace, as its pragmatic interests towards EU integration prevail.

This largest Balkan country has two-thirds of its total trade with EU countries. It is highly dependent on their supply chains and integrated effectively into the European economic and technological area.

Additionally, Serbia views the mediation of the EU and the US as a historic chance to end the long-term conflict with Kosovo through a compromise. This is the principal political condition for its full integration into the Union.

The Athens summit could prove to be a turning point in accelerating a crucial and unfinished EU task: the cleaning up of the Balkan region, with the significant role of Ukraine and its leader.