Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: TA | AP Insight

EU says it is ready to take on new members

The European Union on Wednesday offered fresh hope for Serbia's membership talks if the election-winning student movement there forms a government willing to strengthen democracy as the bloc signaled that more countries are set to join in coming years.

In its annual enlargement report, the European Commission said that Montenegro is on track to become the EU's 28th member in 2028, and that Albania and Moldova could join the following year.

Ukraine is unlikely to meet the conditions for joining before the end of the decade.

"The significant progress achieved by some candidates over the last year allows us to turn the promise of enlargement into reality," European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said. "Step by step, we are building a more complete, stronger Union."

A chance to revive talks with Serbia

Under populist president Aleksandar Vucic, who was defeated in the election last month, Serbia opened some new policy chapters in its talks to join the world's biggest trading bloc. It was technically making progress but democratic standards deteriorated.

In April, the commission warned that Serbia could lose access to around 1.5 billion euros ($1.7 billion) in funds if it failed to halt the backsliding.

The hero's funeral in Belgrade in September for Ratko Mladic, the Bosnian Serb commander who died while serving a life sentence for war crimes, also angered EU leaders after they had warned against any public homage.

But the election of a diverse student-led opposition movement that spent two years protesting Vucic's government could provide an opening for a reset with the most influential of the Western Balkan countries in line at Europe's door.

> Now Serbia has the chance for a fresh start - Marta Kos

"Now Serbia has the chance for a fresh start," Enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos told EU lawmakers as she debriefed them on the report.

"The new Serbian government has an opportunity to turn the page, strengthen democratic institutions and fundamental rights, and take the necessary steps to advance on Serbia's accession path," she said.

Serbia could progress rapidly under a government with strong political will but membership currently looks years away.

The formation of a government in Belgrade could take months. EU membership does not appear to be the top priority of a movement lacking political experience and intent mostly on rooting out corruption, even if that fight does align with the bloc's values.

A new roadmap for EU membership

In a new addition, the commission has laid out a "roadmap" for each country wanting to join.

The last to sign up was Croatia, 13 years ago. The EU's expansion ground to a halt as members worried that the bloc was become too unwieldy to function properly.

The prospect of membership has been a powerful driver of reform, notably in the volatile Western Balkans which were riven by wars in the 1990s and where ethnic tensions still run high. Six countries from the region want to join.

Montenegro, Albania, Moldova and Ukraine are those most likely to join soon, and in that order

The European Commission, the EU's powerful executive branch that oversees the enlargement process, now believes that Europe's rich club is ready to take on new members.

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So far, Moldova and Ukraine have followed their membership paths in lock step. Both have made much progress on reforms in recent years, despite the impact of Russian influence in Moldova and almost five years of war in Ukraine.

But the commission now says that Moldova could wind up its negotiations in early 2028, paving the way for it to join the following year.

Once accession talks are over, EU member countries must unanimously endorse a candidate before it can join. The entire process could take a year.

Ukraine is being urged to accelerate reforms if it hopes to meet its "ambitious objective" of closing negotiations by the end of 2028, meaning that it's unlikely to take a seat at the EU's table before 2030.

The other two candidates from the Western Balkans — Bosnia-Herzegovina and North Macedonia — have no imminent prospect of joining, due to Bosnia's mostly dysfunctional coalition government and a need for constitutional changes in North Macedonia.

Kosovo hopes to join but has not been granted candidate status.

Negotiations involving Georgia and Turkey are at a standstill due to democratic backsliding in both countries.