



BiEPAG



Bouncing back: Completing the EU unification process

Recent progress in the case of the six Western Balkan countries accession to the European Union seems to be a case of one step forward and two steps back – or to use a soccer metaphor, the goal posts are always moving. The lack of concrete progress and clear recognition of progress made is beginning to have an effect not only on political elites, but also on the public. With other global players on Europe's doorstep looking to make their own gains in the region, the EU needs a convincing path for the WB6 to enter the Union. The way forward does not need to be radical: with a few tweaks and some creative thinking, existing mechanisms could still work. But this has to be done in the context of treating the countries as future members of the EU. This means more often including them in the processes that the EU uses to appraise current Member States, as well as finding ways to make the flow of funding reflect this idea that all six are future Member States. Revisiting the idea of “linearization” of funds to the WB6 would be an excellent place to start, as well as devising a clear tailor-made accession partnership roadmap for each of the Western Balkans countries.

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Facing reality

In the last three years the European Union (EU) has repeatedly indicated that it cared for the Western Balkan countries and their European future. At a strategic thinking level, beginning with the 2018 Credible Enlargement Perspective envisaging 2025 as a target date for some Western Balkan (WB) countries to become members, and continuing with a plethora of documents published (and some even officially adopted) aimed at increasing integration of the region to the European Union. 15 years after the promises of Thessaloniki, it was only in 2018 in Sofia that the EU-Western Balkan Summit was held, followed by the Zagreb Summit in 2020, finally bringing the Western Balkans back on the agenda. The next planned summit in Ljubljana at the end of 2021 is one of many other activities that are being undertaken in order to boost socio-economic recovery and convergence with the EU. But, considering where the countries of the Western Balkans were four or five years ago and where they are today, the reality is that there is no significant obvious move forward for the integration of this region into the EU. The last successful accession (of Croatia) was in 2013 – now eight years ago.

If one was to judge the process only from the achievements to date and all announced activities, processes and assertions, one might be easily deceived into thinking that plans for the final steps for the region's

reintegration into Europe are under way.

The picture is, however, quite different. What we are increasingly seeing, is some EU Member States looking for, and finding, endless reasons to diminish the process and deny any rewards for progress made by the Western Balkan countries. They hide behind the EU institutions that, on the other side, are obliged to set new, complex procedures or amplify debates that are not as relevant as questions of (de)coupling countries to start accession talks. The lack of genuine and honest political will from some EU Member States, some would say, and a lack of strategic vision to integrate the Western Balkans and the Union that now spans the European continent, creates uncertainty that diminishes the credibility of the EU and increases the risk of reversibility in the desire of individual Western Balkans countries to join the EU. In time, this may create an atmosphere in the region where not only political elites are doubtful, but also the citizens at large may start giving up on the goal of accession.² The current EU accession process does not produce positive results and the question is whether, even with the new methodology, it ever will. The uncertainty created in the past years is best reflected in the latest EFB/BiEPAG survey which shows a rather skeptical attitude of the citizens in the Western Balkans when asked about the timeline of the EU accession process (Table 1).

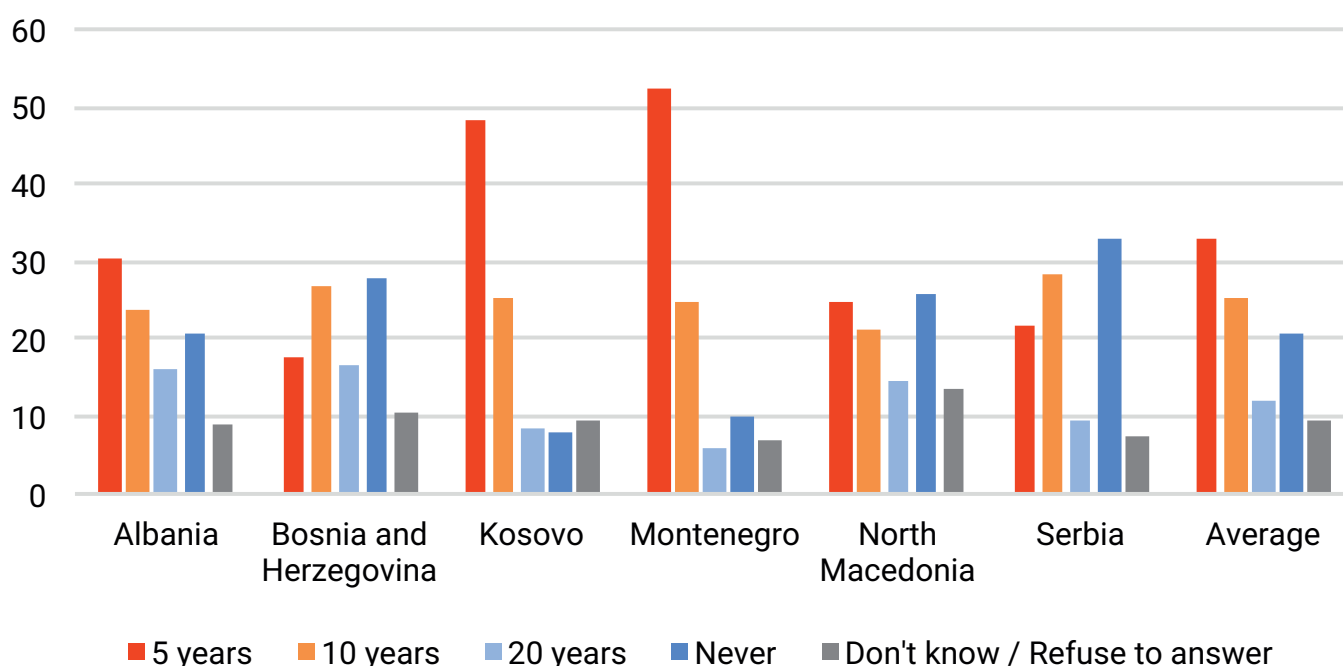


Table 1: Do you think EU accession will happen over next 5/10/20 years or never?

1 Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group, "Unfulfilled Promise: Completing the EU Enlargement to the Balkans," 2014, <http://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Unfulfilled-Promise-Completing-the-EU-Enlargement-to-the-Balkans.pdf>.



Uncertainty triggers fear and doubt about the future of the region within the European family. The EU is losing more ground in the Western Balkans than it realizes, and it is not only from a sense of the disappointment arising from the EU enlargement process, but a rational notion of a palpable lack of faith felt among the citizens in the region. In times when Russia is scaling-up its military presence on Europe's borders with Ukraine and in illegally-annexed Crimea; when other authoritarian regimes are increasing their malign activities and influence in the region (aimed at undermining other countries' democratic systems); the EU needs a stable, resilient region in its own front yard, in order to ensure its own security. The truth remains that the EU is increasingly competing for influence in its own yard with other external actors already present, some with serious appetites for the region.

The longer the region waits in front of the EU's door, the more fragile their young democracies and economies become. Slow socio-economic convergence, the brain drain and the other effects of current stabilization strategies will gradually discourage the genuinely pro-European constituency in the Western Balkans from pursuing consolidation of the rule of law and of democracy, because of the lack of critical support from the EU in terms of the legitimacy to pursue these policies domestically. When one adds the significantly lower financial package for the WB than was expected, offered to the region through the Instrument for pre-accession assistance III and the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, compared to the packages provided to EU Member States through the current EU long-term budget (Multiannual Financial Framework) 2021-2027 and the New Generation EU recovery fund, it is increasingly obvious that there is a serious risk of growing divergence between the region and the EU. The countries might then look to other external actors for funds.³

Agreeing on these realities is the first step towards devising a new, fresh and pragmatic approach towards the region. Employing strategic thinking and a new emphasis towards the region is required if the EU wants the accession countries to contribute to its own bouncing back after the pandemic years. This could pave the way for fundamental progress in reaching the EU's ambitious goal of strategic autonomy. EU Member States need to understand and display their common interest in realizing the

WB region as an integral part of the future European Union, acting decisively and more resolutely in order to achieve a common position on a strategic outlook for the Western Balkans region. This would show to the world that its capacity to act is growing. The EU cannot afford to continue postponing its strategic decisions in order to synchronize them with different national political electoral cycles. How can a "geopolitical" European Union play its role without being brave, creative and seizing a new decisive moment? Together we could renew with such pragmatic ambition, as a new element of the future of the EU.

Efforts that are bearing fruit

The current EU accession toolbox *may* be sufficient. The instruments needed to enhance the accession of these countries with a view to membership are there. Only minor tweaks and moderate streamlining would produce the necessary results. For example, the new methodology for accession negotiations can be seen as a novel political framework for a technical "accession driven" process, fully respecting merit-based principles.⁴ However, greater emphasis is currently placed on negative conditionality, how negotiations with a country can be *stopped* instead of focusing on rewards; i.e. how the countries that perform sufficiently well would be awarded and have their integration in the EU accelerated. This, fundamentally, raises doubts in accession countries about its true nature.

This brief aims to assist EU decision makers to return to the spirit of accession, and the transformational potential of the enlargement process to give the European Commission the necessary political support to carry on with the process. What do we suggest? What is needed to achieve this forgotten imperative that was formerly one of the most successful EU policies?

The Western Balkan countries *are future members of the EU*. They need to be approached as such, thereby assessing their level of alignment and success in implementing EU rules and regulations, in comparison with current EU Member States. No one should fear that this approach will reveal the poor state of affairs in which the region currently languishes. Even if this is the case, then everyone will be assured that these countries (or some of them) are not ready to join - yet. However, this unleashes

2 Matteo Bonomi, "In Search of EU Strategic Autonomy: What Role for the Western Balkans?" (Istituto Affari Internazionali I.A.I., forthcoming).

3 Zoran Nechev et al., "The New EU Accession Methodology. Is It Enough to Pull the Western Balkans In?" (Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis" - Skopje, 2021), https://idsos.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/A5_WEB_New_Accession_Methodology_EU-WB-1.pdf.

the potential of the Western Balkan countries to compare, contrast and compete with the best from the Union.

Take, for example the EU Justice Scoreboard that the European Commission has published on an annual basis in order to provide a comparative overview of the efficiency, quality and independence of justice systems in all EU Member States.⁵ Instead of the current approach that measures candidate countries' progress, it would be more efficient, economical and rational to integrate the Western Balkans in the EU Justice Scoreboard and assess the region's countries as members of a wider, common rule-of-law based community and compare them with EU Member States. Needless to say, this will spare time and energy to the relevant DGs specifically devoted to the Western Balkans and the assessment would be made in conjunction with all the other Member States.

The Rule of law and EU Justice Scoreboard are used as a reference in the overall European Semester procedure and will serve the same purpose in drafting the new Rule of law Report. Consequently, the participation of Western Balkan countries in this Scoreboard will feed information and data and pave the way for participation in the other two mentioned mechanisms.

The European Semester provides a framework for the coordination of economic policies across the EU and serves as a venue for discussion about EU Member States economic and budget plans and monitors progress made within specific timeframes. According to the new methodology for enlargement, *economic criteria* are part of the most important fundamentals cluster. This is in addition to public procurement, statistics, financial control, rule of law chapters and the functioning of democratic institutions. As this is a novelty in the accession negotiations process (economic criteria) it is still questionable how the Commission will assess those economic criteria. Instead of trying to re-invent the wheel, what the institutions could do is to integrate the Western Balkan countries, to the extent possible, into the European semester framework. By doing so, the Commission will monitor and assess the risk of macroeconomic imbalances and can provide structural country-specific recommendations to the Western Balkans as it would to any other EU Member State. This can be organised by replacing the Economic Reform Programmes that the accession

countries are preparing with their full participation into the EU's economic policy coordination procedures within the European Semester. This would be a kind of embryonic plan for economic convergence until full membership.

Integrating the Western Balkans into existing EU mechanisms will also provide European decision-makers with something concrete on which to base their decisions either to speed up or slow down the accession process based on comparative data - not only from the Western Balkan countries but also from the EU Member States. This can help build greater confidence in the process from existing Member States.

When it comes to the EU's absorption capacity as a separate criterion for the accession of new Member States, it is important also to ensure that the institutions and citizens of the EU will be ready, once these six countries fulfill the necessary criteria. This will also feed the institutional and governance dimension of the absorption capacity (impact on the EU's capacity to act) as well as positively influencing the extremely politicized dimension of public acceptance in existing EU Member States.⁶ It will not come as a surprise to them as they will then be used to seeing and perceiving the Western Balkan countries as part of the future Union. This is something that even the most targeted public relations campaign with the best communication strategy could not do. Instead of seeing a hole in Europe's map, they will see a unified and territorially integrated Europe when they look at the South East of the continent.

This approach will require increasing the capacities of all DGs with additional personnel, thus diversifying the portfolios in which the Western Balkan countries are currently dealt. From primarily one, DG NEAR, a plethora of institutions will interact with the WB countries on a regular basis. The budgetary implication for such a move would be insignificant compared to the effect this approach would have on the integration process, from both the EU and WB sides. Because in the end, it is not only about the capacities of the Western Balkan administrations to align fully with the EU, but also the EU's capacities to integrate other countries along this paved path.

The WB is the most socio-economically underdeveloped part of the future EU. The Commission's Western Balkans Economic and

4 European Commission, "EU Justice Scoreboard," accessed June 12, 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/upholding-rule-law/eu-justice-scoreboard_en.

5 Advisory Council on International Affairs, "The EU's Capacity for Further Enlargement," 2010, <https://www.advisorycouncilinternationalaffairs.nl/documents/publications/2010/07/02/the-eu-s-capacity-for-further-enlargement>.



Investment Plan (EIP) is a positive attempt and an indication of the EU's readiness to assist the economic recovery of the countries in the region and support their green and digital transitions. However, it has become obvious that weak economies in the region will struggle to achieve socio-economic convergence without more substantial EU support. Exactly ten years ago, Western Balkan countries sent an official request to the EC to reconsider its pre-accession financial instruments. They argued that financial support should be perceived as common investment, and that it should be provided early enough in the process to "transform their economies and societies and modernize their infrastructure" in line with the EU's rules and standards. Thus, they advocated for "linearization", or gradual increase of financial support in areas of common interest; of financial support in order to reap the early benefits of economic development; and the introduction of rules similar to those regulating EU Structural Funds in order to prepare their absorption capacities well in advance to their accession to the EU when they would be eligible to receive and manage much higher amounts of financial support.

Currently, the Western Balkan countries are predicted to receive "up to" 9 billion EUR through the Economic Investment Plan for the Western Balkans over the next seven years. An additional 20 billion EUR could be "potentially mobilized" with the support of the new Western Balkans Guarantee facility. In the best-case scenario, this would amount to a similar sum that a *single EU Member State* from the region would receive through its long-term budget appropriation and NextGenerationEU recovery instrument during the same period. For example, Croatia, the latest addition to the EU and originally a constituent part of the Western Balkans, will receive 22 billion EUR through these two instruments. In the next seven years EU Member States from the region would receive up to ten times more financial support per capita than Western Balkan countries. This means that the economic and social gap between the EU and WB6, in its own neighbourhood, will further expand rather than be narrowed. The consequences would be devastating for the region - further lagging behind economically, no future perspective for youth the of region, depopulation and brain drain, just to name some.

The EU should revisit the request from the region made ten years ago and think of ways to improve pre-accession support making it more efficient and development oriented. Linearization of funds in areas such as environment, energy, transport

infrastructure, education and science, have a win-win potential. Full alignment of IPA rules and procedures with the EU Structural Funds model should enable better administrative and institutional preparation for effective and efficient EU membership of the Western Balkan countries. Stronger financial support could play an additional role in decreasing the malign influence of foreign actors in the region and create bigger and more efficient leverage for the introduction of functional conditionality policies in countries that are showing signs of backsliding in respect to the rule of law and democracy principles.

How to move forward

The current EU accession process with the countries of the Western Balkans is not producing results that will democratize their societies and increase socio-economic convergence between the region and the EU. The instruments needed to enhance the accession of these countries with a view to membership are there. To restore the transformative power and nature of the process, the initial step is to reach consensus on the realities with which the region is faced by all involved parties, and interact with these countries as future members of the European family.

Once this is achieved, the following steps would follow:

- The production of a clear tailor-made accession partnership roadmap for each of the Western Balkans countries;
- The integration of Western Balkan countries into existing EU mechanisms such as the EU Justice Scoreboard, the new Rule of law Report and the European Semester framework;
- An increase in the EU's absorption capacity by diversifying the portfolios in which the Western Balkan countries are dealt with at the European level and not focusing solely on DG NEAR;
- A substantial increase of funds channeled to the Western Balkans in environment, energy, transport infrastructure where citizens of these countries will see the concrete benefits of accession;
- A full alignment of the Instrument for pre-accession assistance rules and procedures with the EU Structural Funds model.



About us

The **Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group** (BiEPAG) is a cooperation initiative of the European Fund for the Balkans (EFB) and Centre for the Southeast European Studies of the University of Graz (CSEES) with the aim to promote the European integration of the Western Balkans and the consolidation of democratic, open countries in the region. BiEPAG is composed by prominent policy researchers from the Western Balkans and wider Europe that have established themselves for their knowledge and understanding of the Western Balkans and the processes that shape the region. Current members of the BiEPAG are: Dimitar Bechev, Florian Bieber, Srđan Cvijić, Milica Delević, Srđan Majstorović, Natasha Wunsch, Marika Djolai, Vedran Džihčić, Dejan Jović, Marko Kmezić, Jovana Marović, Milan Nič, Corina Stratulat, Nikolaos Tzifakis, Alida Vračić, Shpend Emini, Zoran Nechev, Tena Prelec, Donika Emini, Jelena Vasiljević, Gjergji Vurmo and Matteo Bonomi.

<https://biepag.eu> The **Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group** (BiEPAG) is a joint initiative of the European Fund for the Balkans (EFB) and Centre for the Southeast European Studies of the University of Graz (CSEES) promoting the European integration of the Western Balkans and the consolidation of democratic, open countries in the region. BiEPAG is grounded in the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. It adheres to values that are common to a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.

It is composed of prominent policy researchers from the region and wider Europe with demonstrable comprehension of the Western Balkans and the processes shaping the region. Current members are: Florian Bieber, Matteo Bonomi, Dimitar Bechev, Srđan Cvijić, Marika Djolai, Milica Delević, Vedran Džihčić, Donika Emini, Richard Grieveson, Dejan Jović, Marko Kmezić, Jovana Marović, Srđan Majstorović, Zoran Nechev, Tena Prelec, Corina Stratulat, Nikolaos Tzifakis, Alida Vračić, Gjergji Vurmo, Jelena Vasiljević, Natasha Wunsch.

www.balkanfund.org The **European Fund for the Balkans** is a joint initiative of the [Erste Foundation](#), [Robert Bosch Foundation](#) and [King Baudouin Foundation](#) that envisions and facilitates initiatives strengthening democracy, fostering European integration and affirming the role of the Western Balkans in addressing Europe's challenges. Its strategy is focused on three overarching areas – fostering democratisation, enhancing regional cooperation and boosting EU Integration.

The EFB supports the process of affirming the efficacy of EU enlargement policy across the Western Balkans, improving regional cooperation amongst civil society organisations based on solidarity and demand-driven dialogue. It provides means and platforms for informed and empowered citizens to take action demanding accountable institutions and democracy. The focus is on continuous reforms of the policies and practices of the Western Balkans countries on their way to EU accession.

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www.suedosteuropa.uni-graz.at The **Centre for Southeast European Studies** was set up in November 2008 following the establishment of Southeast Europe as a strategic priority at the University of Graz in 2000. The Centre is an interdisciplinary and cross-faculty institution for research and education, with the goal to provide space for the rich teaching and research activities at the university on and with Southeast Europe and to promote interdisciplinary collaboration.

The Centre also aims to provide information and documentation and to be a point of contact for media and public interested in Southeast Europe, in terms of political, legal, economic and cultural developments. An interdisciplinary team of lawyers, historians, and political scientists has contributed to research on Southeast Europe, through articles, monographs and other publications. The centre regularly organizes international conferences and workshops to promote cutting edge research on Southeast Europe.

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