

Integrating the Western Balkans: Completing Future Europe

In light of the current debate on the future of the EU, it is clear that the EU will not be complete, nor fully integrated, resilient and prosperous without the Western Balkans countries. We have common challenges and it is our joint responsibility to find common solutions. The environmental, climate, energy, migration, security, digital (AI) and geopolitical challenges are of common interest of both WB and EU. They are inextricably linked and inseparably intertwined. Full integration of the Western Balkans into the EU brings more effective and efficient solutions to these challenges and safer and more predictable future for all.

The policy of EU integration of Western Balkan countries has reached a crossroads. Despite the pledge by the EU member states at the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit that all Western Balkan countries have an EU membership perspective, only Croatia succeeded in joining the Union in 2013. European Commission's Western Balkans Communication from 2018 once again encouraged WB countries and provided them with a potential EU accession scenario, but it turned out that this perspective was unrealistic. The decision of the European Council in October 2019 not to open accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia has tarnished EU's credibility, undermined the trust and put the entire integration perspective on hold.

The current stalemate in EU accession process has less to do with the enlargement framework than with the lack of political will of both the governments in the region and EU member states. However, the lack of consensus on opening negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia and the resulting debate about the enlargement mechanism offer a unique opportunity to assess this process and offer proposals for its improvement. A crisis creates opportunities for change, and it would be a shame to waste a "good crisis" such as this without fundamentally improving the process of EU integration of the Western Balkans.

France initiated changes to the methodology by offering its own position on reforming the EU integration process of the Western Balkans in a non-paper, which was followed by another non-paper submitted by nine EU member states. The European Commission is expected to present its own proposal for reforming the process in early 2020, which will be discussed and adopted in the coming months by the Member States. Therefore, there is time for the Western Balkans countries to contribute to this debate and offer suggestions and ideas that would significantly improve the process.

This document represents a set of recommendations by Serbian think tanks and civil society organizations specialized in European integration on how to effectively improve the EU enlargement framework. It is based on experience in monitoring, analyzing and participating in the EU accession process of Serbia and other Western Balkan countries. The recommendations are aimed at improving the effectiveness of the EU integration process of Western Balkan countries and reconfirming the sustainable and tangible EU perspective of the region. It should be emphasised, however, that no methodology can replace existence (or lack) of political will on both sides.

It is not entirely clear whether the expected reform will also apply to countries already involved in EU accession negotiations, Montenegro and Serbia. Having in mind that the lack of implementation of key reforms in these two countries is perhaps the best argument for inadequacy of the current accession mechanism, our proposals are designed for all Western Balkans countries.

1. EU integration running in parallel with EU internal reform

As future members, Western Balkans countries are welcoming the forthcoming reform of the EU. Even though internal reform of the EU is needed for its own future, there is no reason why integration of the Western Balkans would not go hand in hand. Previous major reforms of the EU ran in parallel with earlier rounds of EU enlargement, which were significantly bigger in scope. Indefinitely postponing integration of Western Balkan countries before internal reforms are done could undermine EU's foreign and security policy strategic autonomy and its geopolitical goals.

Inviting Western Balkan countries to participate in the Conference on the Future of Europe is a fundamentally important message to citizens in the region and would be a good way to demonstrate these countries are seen as equals. This was done for countries of Central and East Europe in 2002 when Convention was drafting the Constitution of Europe.

2. Including Western Balkan countries in EU programmes

Gradual association of Western Balkan countries with different European Union programmes, which was suggested by the French non-paper is a welcome initiative. Providing candidate countries with concrete benefits would encourage actual implementation of concrete reforms and offer the citizens of the Western Balkans clear benefits long before actual accession. Having in mind the length of the process and the looming doubts among citizens in its successful completion, this mechanism could provide a much-needed bottom-up boost to the EU integration process and increase the support for more EU membership-driven changes in respective Western Balkan societies.

Western Balkan countries should be included in the European Green Deal, which represents one of the most important EU initiatives today. Combating climate change and achieving the goal of a carbon-neutral continent by 2050 requires reforms in the Western Balkans as well. Because of its potentials, however, the region not only represents a potential obstacle

towards achieving this goal, but also an excellent opportunity for developing renewable energy.

The same goes for the proposed participation of the representatives of the candidate countries in meetings of the Council (once they close negotiation chapters related to specific configuration of the Council), as well as for the gradual integration in other EU institutions.

3. Clearly identifying elements of state capture in the Western Balkan countries

European Commission's Western Balkans Strategy from February 2018 recognized that there are "elements of state capture" in all Western Balkan countries. The European Commission country reports, especially those for the frontrunners Serbia and Montenegro, express significant concerns for the rule of law and freedom of media. However, European institutions remain shy when it comes to identifying concrete examples of state capture and media capture, which allows Western Balkan governments to ignore such criticism.

EU institutions should create instruments that would clearly recognize state capture and media capture in Western Balkan countries, which needs to be followed by public condemnation and clear action by EU officials. Instruments such as the Priebe report on rule of law in North Macedonia have already proven their usefulness for detecting state capture and have enabled the EU to act accordingly. Such instruments should be used in other Western Balkan countries as well.

4. Improving system for measuring progress in accession negotiations

The system for measuring progress in negotiating chapters needs to be improved. Overall indicative timeframe for finishing negotiations and reaching EU standards should be agreed with a candidate country, thus placing additional pressure on the candidates' Governments to deliver. EU would not be bound by indicative dates if standards are not met. Moreover, prioritization of measures and clear deadlines for implementing them, as well as sanctions in case of failure need to be set. The responsibility mechanism for lack of progress needs to be clearly established. Also, citizens in the Western Balkans deserve to understand better how the progress towards EU membership is being measured.

Currently the chapters 23 and 24 are at the centre of EU accession negotiations of Western Balkan countries. While this is undoubtedly positive, instruments for measuring progress in the two chapters need to be improved, coordinated and synchronized in order to properly assess the progress and enable the use of the imbalance clause. Proposed corrective measures had shown ineffective and burdening for the reform process, and the mechanism to force the governments to address matters seriously and properly must be introduced.

5. Increasing available funds for candidate countries

The existing IPA funds available for Western Balkan countries are much smaller than the structural funds available for member states, especially when compared to funds opened to Central and East European Countries (CEECs) during their EU accession. The candidate countries should be given access to additional funds, which should increase structural sustainable development as the country is moving closer to EU membership. Moreover, access to additional funds could be conditioned by successful reforms in rule of law and other key areas, which would provide a mechanism for rewards and sanctions, and provide incentives for the governments to commit to the reform agenda.

6. Increasing EU engagement in resolving bilateral disputes in the Western Balkans

Bilateral disputes represent an important obstacle for EU accession of Western Balkan countries. This applies to both disputes between Western Balkan countries and between Western Balkan countries and neighbouring EU member states. There are already examples of serious negative consequences of these disputes for EU accession of the countries in the region and it is expected this will also be the case in the future.

The EU is adamant that it will not import more bilateral disputes and that they need to be resolved prior to accession. However, the EU should increase its engagement in their resolution, as the current mechanisms do not appear to be sufficient. Engagement of other actors in this regard could be beneficial, but the EU still has the most important role. Stepping up efforts toward resolution of bilateral disputes could increase EU's credibility not only in the region, but in global arena as well.

7. Introducing qualified majority voting in the EU on accession issues

The existing decision-making process within the European Union gives individual EU member states ample opportunities to block the accession process at any given stage. This also allows Member States to use the accession process to resolve open bilateral issues with candidate countries. These damages the credibility of the European Union as a whole and the process of integration of Western Balkan countries in particular.

While Member States will have a final say in accepting new members, decision-making within the Council of the EU should be adjusted to allow qualified majority vote on procedural aspects of EU enlargement issues, thus making the process less dependable on bilateral political pressure coming from individual Member States. Additionally, the role of the Commission should be strengthened, and its reports and recommendations followed by member states and not considered only as stocktaking.

8. Working together on public support for integration of Western Balkan countries

It is necessary to address the lukewarm support of EU citizens to integration of the Western Balkan countries. Prejudice, fake news, poor information, civic space shrinking, and lack of knowledge should be overcome through common influence on public opinion. As part of the integration agenda, EU institutions and Member States should launch a joint communication program with the Western Balkan countries. This program, which would be implemented across the EU, would focus on promoting the common history, culture, values and vision of future of our region and the European Union.

Political elites in the Western Balkans should fully and without prejudice take part in and support the implementation of this program in respective countries in order to explain the changes required in the EU accession process, boost the support for the reforms and solving internal political challenges the region is facing. This will require mobilization of all societal resources including national parliaments, media, academic institutions, think tanks and civil society organizations.

These recommendations are submitted by the following think tanks and civil society organizations from Serbia:

Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCBP)

Belgrade Fund for Political Excellence (BFPE)

Centre for Contemporary Politics (CSP)

European Movement in Serbia (EMINS)

European Policy Centre (CEP)

International and Security Affairs Centre (ISAC)

Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights (YUCOM)

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