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EU enlargement policy in the light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine – Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership: accelerated EU pre-accession assistance

Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union

Parliamentary Dimension

In March 2020, the European Commission presented the Communication [Enhancing the accession process - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans](#), which aimed to increase the efficiency and dynamism of the Western Balkans accession process and to ensure its predictability and credibility. This revised methodology for the enlargement process also established the principles of positive and negative conditionality. Positive conditionality consists in closer integration of the acceding country with the EU and the possibility of obtaining a larger volume of funds and investments available to the country even if only partial conditions are met. Negative conditionality means, on the contrary, opening of individual chapters that have already been closed or reducing the volume of funds provided if the country's progress towards compliance with the conditions set stagnates or deteriorates.

In May 2021, the Council agreed to apply this methodology to the accession negotiations with Montenegro (from 2012) and Serbia (from 2014). Together with the [European Commission's 2020 Communication on EU enlargement policy](#), which assessed the progress made by the Western Balkans and Turkey in the EU accession process over the past year, [an Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans](#) was adopted to accelerate and support economic growth and necessary reforms.

The state of the accession process was last assessed by the European Commission in October 2021 in its [2021 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy](#). In this document, the Commission recalled the EU's support to the region in the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and the adoption of the [Regulation establishing the Instrument for Pre-Accession assistance \(IPA III\)](#), which will allow the implementation of the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans to start. The Commission has also noted that the delay in the official start of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia is having a negative impact on the EU's credibility.

So far, the last ministerial-level accession conferences with Montenegro and Serbia took place in December 2021. In the case of Montenegro, it was noted that out of a total of 35 negotiating chapters, 33 chapters had been opened, of which 3 had been provisionally closed. The Accession Conference with Serbia opened Cluster Four, which includes four chapters. Thus, in the case of Serbia, a total of 22 chapters were opened for negotiation, of which 2 were provisionally closed. In July 2022, the first Accession Conferences with Albania and North Macedonia were held, following the March 2020 Council decision, with delegations calling on the European Commission to continue assessing the state of preparedness of both countries so that negotiations in specific areas could be launched.

On 23 June 2022, a meeting of EU and Western Balkans leaders took place, where, among other things, they discussed the alignment of the foreign policy of the Western Balkans with the EU's CFSP, limiting Russia's influence in the region and strengthening connectivity and energy security in the region. EU leaders reiterated their support for the integration of the Western Balkans into the EU and explored ways to advance the integration process with the leaders of the said countries.

The length and protracted nature of the integration process of the Western Balkans and Turkey into the EU (see table below) may result in a sense of unfulfilled expectations and the goal of EU accession seeming ever more distant¹.

Table: Overview of EU membership applications of the Western Balkans and Turkey and current states of the accession process

¹ See the expectations of respondents in the Western Balkans regarding the perspective of their country's accession to the EU in the *Public Opinion Poll in the Western Balkans on the EU Integration*. Europeanwesternbalkans.com [online], European Western Balkans 8/11/2021 [cit. 2022-08-18]. Available at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/11/08/public-opinion-poll-in-the-western-balkans-on-the-eu-integration/>

| Country | Year of application for EU membership | Current state of the accession process |
|------------------------|---------------------------------------|---|
| Turkey | 1987 | Accession negotiations are <i>de facto</i> frozen |
| North Macedonia | 2004 | Accession negotiations started in July 2022 |
| Montenegro | 2008 | 33 negotiating chapters opened; 3 chapters provisionally closed |
| Albania | 2009 | Accession negotiations started in July 2022 |
| Serbia | 2009 | 22 negotiating chapters opened; 2 chapters provisionally closed |
| Bosnia and Herzegovina | 2016 | Potential candidate country |
| Kosovo ² | - | In 2021, the country announced its intention to apply for EU membership |



Source: Prepared by the author

The application of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia for EU membership in February and March 2022, respectively, and the recognition of candidate status for Ukraine and Moldova in June 2022 have thus reopened the debate on the EU enlargement process, its effectiveness, credibility and possibilities for further development. Although the decision to grant candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova is generally considered to be a political signal sent in the knowledge that the Russian aggression in Ukraine was, among other things, a reaction to the country's European aspirations, and there are no plans to accelerate the accession process of these countries itself³, the question has arisen whether the accession process of the new candidate countries will have a negative impact on the EU's relationship with the Western Balkans.⁴ For the European Union, the renewed debate on the enlargement process is an opportunity to rethink the existing mechanisms, to look for innovative solutions and also to take a more strategic approach to the whole process, taking into account the socio-economic weakening of the region caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the current energy and food crisis and the related threat of Russia's increased influence on the region.

² This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

³ "The accession process remains based on **established criteria and conditions.**" See *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council: Commission Opinion on Ukraine's application for membership of the European Union*. COM(2022) 407 final. Eur-lex.europa.eu [online], European Commission 17/6/2022 [cit. 2022-08-18]. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:790c4aab-ee22-11ec-a534-01aa75ed71a1.0001.02/DOC_1&format=PDF, p. 21

⁴ According to opinion polls in selected European countries and in the USA in June-July 2022, Ukraine's accession to the EU is more widely supported in all these countries than the accession of the Western Balkans. See: YouGov – international Ukraine war, wave 3. Docs.cdn.yougov.com [online], YouGov Survey Results 22/7/2022 [cit. 2022-08-18]. Available at: <https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/v61mevh65q/Ukraine%20Wave%203%20compiled.pdf>, pp. 16-18



Topics for discussion

- 1) How to revive the accession process of the Western Balkans?
- 2) Can Member States get more involved in the process?
- 3) Is the revised methodology a sufficiently up-to-date tool to assist in the accession process of the Western Balkans and is it also thusly applicable to the accession process of Ukraine and Moldova?
- 4) What are the lessons to be learned from the stagnating integration process of the Western Balkans for the accession process with Ukraine and Moldova?
- 5) How to improve strategic communication with the Western Balkans, both with their political leaders and civil society?