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The European perspective of the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries

The EU's enlargement policy currently directly pertains to the Western Balkans (the Republic of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, the Republic of Kosovo¹, the Republic of North Macedonia and the Republic of Serbia), the Republic of Moldova, the Republic of Türkiye and Ukraine. 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 EU Council agreed to apply this methodology to the accession negotiations with Montenegro (started in 2012) and Serbia (started in 2014).

So far, the last ministerial-level accession conferences with Montenegro and Serbia took place in December 2021. In the case of Montenegro, out of a total of 35 negotiating chapters, 33 chapters were opened, of which 3 were provisionally closed. The Accession Conference with Serbia opened a Cluster Four, which includes four chapters. Thus, a total of 22 chapters were opened for negotiation, of which 2 were provisionally closed. The first Accession Conferences with Albania and North Macedonia took place in July 2022, following the EU Council Decision from March 2020. At these conferences, delegations called on the European Commission to continue assessing the state of readiness of both countries so that negotiations could begin in specific areas.

An EU-Western Balkans leaders' meeting took place on 23 June 2022. The participants discussed, among other things, the alignment of the foreign policy of the Western Balkans with the CFSP of the European Union, limiting Russia's influence in the region and enhancing 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. On 20 September 2022, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell hosted an informal lunch with Western Balkans leaders in New York in the margins of the 77th session of the United Nations General Assembly. Participants discussed a joint response to the global and regional impact of Russian aggression in Ukraine and the High Representative reiterated the EU's support in strengthening energy security and countering hybrid threats.

¹ 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.

The state of the accession process was last assessed by the European Commission in October 2022 in its [2022 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy](#). Two key and interlinked events have occurred since the previous assessment was published in October 2021: the Russian aggression in Ukraine was launched and Moldova and Ukraine became candidate countries for EU accession. As the Commission states in its current document, “the Russian aggression has demonstrated more clearly than ever that the perspective of membership of the European Union is a strong anchor not only for prosperity, but also for peace and security”.² The Commission commended Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Montenegro for their alignment with EU restrictive measures in response to Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine, noting that Serbia and Türkiye have not done so to date.³ While Türkiye has contributed significantly to the agreement between Russia and Ukraine on grain exports from Ukrainian ports and is a strategic partner for the EU in the area of food security, it has also strengthened its trade and financial ties with Russia. In the document, the European Commission also outlines the ways in which cooperation between the EU and the Western Balkans has been enhanced against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine (e.g. by involving the Western Balkans in the REPowerEU initiative). In the document, the Commission also highlighted the first Accession Conferences with Albania and North Macedonia and stressed that the proposed visa liberalisation with Kosovo should be discussed by the EU Council as a matter of urgency.

The full implementation of the [Economic and Investment Plan](#) has been launched in 2021, which was adopted together with the European Commission’s [2020 Communication on EU enlargement policy](#) and aims to accelerate and support economic growth and necessary reforms. Since the launch, investment grants totalling EUR 1,3 billion have been approved through the Western Balkans Investment Framework to finance 24 flagship projects with a total investment value of EUR 3,3 billion.⁴ Implementation of the [Instrument for Pre-Accession assistance \(IPA III\)](#) also continued. In the current period 2021–2027, around EUR 30 billion in grants (EUR 9 billion) and investments are to be mobilised under these instruments.⁵ In 2021, the EU was also by far the largest trading partner in the Western Balkans.⁶ In this context, it is important that the EU has sufficient visibility as a key investor and trading partner in the region, especially in comparison with third-country investors.

On 6 October 2022, the first meeting of the European Political Community (EPC) took place in Prague. This new initiative was first suggested by French President Emmanuel Macron and it is intended to provide a platform for European leaders to meet at the highest level, with the possibility of bilateral or multilateral sessions in the narrowest possible format (1+0) on the margins of the meeting. This should provide the European leaders with an informal framework where they can clarify their positions on a range of issues, opening the way for subsequent political negotiations at a lower level. Union officials insist that the EPC is not meant to replace any existing EU policies or instruments, nor is it managed by the EU.

² 2022 *Communication on EU Enlargement Policy*. COM(2022) 528 final. Eur-lex.europa.eu [online], European Commission, Brussels 12/10/2022 [cit. 2022-10-19]. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:620c31ce-4b01-11ed-92ed-01aa75ed71a1.0001.02/DOC_1&format=PDF, p. 2.

³ In the case of Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia, this is 100% alignment with the EU’s CFSP.

⁴ 2022 *Communication on EU Enlargement Policy*. COM(2022) 528 final. Eur-lex.europa.eu [online], European Commission, Brussels 12/10/2022 [cit. 2022-10-19]. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:620c31ce-4b01-11ed-92ed-01aa75ed71a1.0001.02/DOC_1&format=PDF, p. 35.

⁵ Infographic – EU Economic and Investment Plan: unprecedented support for the Western Balkans. Consilium.europa.eu [online], Council of the EU 8/7/2022 [cit. 2022-10-19]. Available at:

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/eu-economic-and-investment-plan-unprecedented-support-for-the-western-balkans/>

⁶ STANICEK, Branislav a Simona TARPOVA. China’s strategic interests in the Western Balkans. Europarl.europa.eu [online], European Parliamentary Research Service 6/2022 [cit. 2022-10-26]. Available at:

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733558/EPRI\(BRI\)\(2022\)733558_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733558/EPRI(BRI)(2022)733558_EN.pdf), p. 2.

However, the emergence of the EPC caused concerns in the Western Balkans that the EU was trying to circumvent the enlargement process, which is marked by its considerable length and protractedness (see table below), and to offer the countries concerned an alternative in the form of political dialogue. These concerns are also compounded by discussions within the Union regarding the EU's capacity to accept new members, which have intensified following the recognition of candidate status for Ukraine and Moldova in June 2022. As a consequence, the Western Balkans may feel a sense of unfulfilled expectations and the goal of EU accession seeming ever-distant⁷. The recognition of candidate status for Ukraine and Moldova, on the other hand, has raised the question of whether the accession process of these countries will negatively affect the EU's relationship with the Western Balkans⁸, despite the fact that there are no plans to accelerate the accession process itself⁹.

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

Country	Year of application for EU membership	Current state of the accession process
Türkiye	1987	Accession negotiations are <i>de facto</i> frozen
North Macedonia	2004	Access negotiations started in July 2022
Montenegro	2008	33 accession negotiation chapters open; 3 chapters provisionally closed
Albania	2009	Access negotiations started in July 2022
Serbia	2009	22 accession negotiation chapters open; 2 chapters provisionally closed
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2016	Potential candidate country
Kosovo ¹⁰	-	The country announced its intention to apply for EU membership in 2021

Source: Prepared by the author

The new geopolitical context has reopened the debate on the EU enlargement process, its effectiveness, credibility and possibilities for further development. For the European Union, this is an opportunity to rethink the existing mechanisms, to look for innovative solutions and also to take a more strategic approach to the

⁷ 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/>

⁸ 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

⁹ "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

¹⁰ 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.



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 as well as the related threat of Russia's increased influence on the region. At the same time, it is necessary to resolve the issue of the Union's capacity to accept new members and to cope with the requirements for compliance with the principles of the rule of law within the EU and with the blocking of the accession process by some Member States, so that these topics cannot be abused in narratives in the Western Balkans to the detriment of integration efforts.

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