

Policy Article

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EU ENLARGEMENT STRATEGY FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS: KOSOVO ON THE BENCH



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EU Enlargement strategy for the Western Balkans – Kosovo on the bench

The year 2018 will reveal a new agenda for the Western Balkans. The European Union plans to undertake three important activities in relation to the Western Balkans; new in the perspective and content. *The Credible Enlargement Perspective for The Western Balkans* foresees Serbia, Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo moving toward full EU membership within a best-case timeframe. Albeit, some much quicker than others.

In the first half of the year, the EU anticipates important activities in relation to the Western Balkans:

- In February the EU will publish its Credible Enlargement perspective for the Western Balkans
- In April the EU will publish comprehensive country reports for all Western Balkan Countries
- In May the EU-Western Balkans Summit will take place in Sofia

In 2014, the Berlin Process, a German led initiative to enhance connectivity and communications in the Balkans, was largely seen as a meagre substitute for EU integration. Now, with the upcoming release of the EU Enlargement Strategy, those fears will partially allay.

The events are intended to promote and set the path for the WB6 countries to become members of the European Union. After years of scepticism toward the enlargement, the EU Commission has suddenly changed course. It now wants the Western Balkans inside the EU. Preparation will also extend to the planning of the 2019-2025 EU budget, which will include more programmes for enlargement and financial assistance for the applicant countries.

Front-runners

The draft strategy labels the Western Balkan countries as partners, *“the Western Balkans are a part of Europe, geographically surrounded by the EU member states”*. *The peoples of the EU and the region have a common heritage, history and a future defined by shared opportunities and challenges*”. Despite this common heritage and shared challenges, the document sets a clear schedule for only two candidate countries, stating that Montenegro and Serbia should be ready for membership by 2025.

The document proposes that the other four countries Albania, BiH, Macedonia and Kosovo, will be well advanced on their European path by then. The strategy sets front-runners, *“provided all benchmarks are met, it offers to close overall negotiations with Montenegro and Serbia by 2023”*. In practical terms both countries, notably Montenegro are well advanced in negotiating the chapters. Yet, having front-runners goes against the statement of the DG Near Commissioner Johannes Hahn who called for an enlargement *en block*. He may not have meant for all six, but at least for four, Serbia, Montenegro, Albania and Macedonia. Montenegrins are furious at being packed together with Serbia who is several steps behind and has the most difficult bilateral issues to resolve. A European diplomat commented, ‘Junker is obsessed with Russia and he wants Serbia in at any cost’. Germany and Austria oppose setting front-runners. Officials in Berlin expect Macedonia and Albania to make a lot of progress and catch up with Serbia.

Reforms

The country reports will identify tasks, priorities and reforms that each country will have to undertake to advance their membership.

President of the European Commission, Jean Claude Juncker, in his 2017 State of the Union address stated *“If we want more stability in our neighbourhood, then we must also maintain a credible enlargement perspective for the Western Balkans. It is clear that there will be no further enlargement during the mandate of this commission and this Parliament. No candidate is ready. But thereafter the European Union will be greater than 27 in number. Accession candidates must give the **rule of law, justice and fundamental rights** utmost priority in the negotiations”*.

Juncker highlighted just three areas for improvement; the new strategy adds **competitiveness, regional cooperation and reconciliation** as ‘crucial areas’ for ‘convincing reforms’. Albania and Macedonia are expected to start negotiations soon; the former *“needs to achieve convincing implementation in five key priority areas including the current judicial reform”*. Macedonia needs to deliver tangible reform results and resolve the ‘name issue’ with Greece. The document is ambiguous about other countries priorities and timetables for the EU integration process. It offers opening of the accession negotiations for BiH only by 2023.

While the strategy sounds a promising plan regarding eventual entry into the EU, the accession processes are no clearer and there are many caveats that can delay the process. The strategy calls for the reforms to transform Balkan societies with leaders and citizens assuming and delivering on ‘European Aspirations’. Some governments may not do so, or need to show soon if they are willing to change course.

Where is Kosovo in the strategy?

The strategy refers to Kosovo only in the context of the dialogue with Serbia, as a benchmark for Serbia’s accession. A European official noted, ‘It seems Kosovo’s path to the EU goes through Belgrade’. The strategy provides no definition on the status of a candidate country for membership.

The strategy notes that by the end of 2019, Serbia should close the interim benchmarks in relation to Chapter 35. It calls for *“a full and comprehensive normalisation of relations... A comprehensive normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia in the form of a legally binding agreement is urgent and crucial for the European perspective of Kosovo and Serbia...”* The draft states *“by then a comprehensive normalisation achieved should open the way for further substantial progress for Kosovo on the path to European integration”*. If it is so, there is no EU perspective for Kosovo, without full normalisation and (defacto) recognition by Serbia; provided Kosovo transform its governance, institutions, rule of law and economy. This seems to be the tool to remove the barriers in EU.

While leaders of Kosovo and Serbia anticipate *the grand finale*, few believe that Serbian and Kosovo leaders can reach an agreement that will resolve bilateral disputes, and establish good neighbourly relations between the two. In the best scenario, governments may agree, but implementation would take years and may fail to resolve disputes. Memories are still very fresh; recent history of negotiations shows that Belgrade and Prishtina can reach agreements on paper but fail to implement them.

The strategy fails to address the domestic challenges the EU faces in relation to Kosovo, but also Macedonia and Albania. Five EU Member States do not recognise Kosovo and have made it impossible for the Commission to present the prospect for Kosovo’s application for the status of a

candidate country for membership to the EU. The strategy takes note of “*the SAA, in force since 2016, a key tool to help Kosovo advance on the way to the Union*”. Yet, it could not be more vague. It does not refer to the European Reform Agenda Program. And European member state, Greece, blocks both Macedonia and Albania. If Serbia is admitted in the current timeline, provisions must be in place to prevent blocking Kosovo’s admission.

Regardless of difficulties and realities, Kosovo has no time to lose. It should seize the opportunity to secure a legally binding agreement that resolves all of its disputes with Serbia. The treaty should include full membership to the UN and other international organisations and a clear path to the EU. Equally important, Kosovo citizens should demand reforms, strengthen institutions, boost economic development and enforce the rule of law. Kosovo should seek to prepare for the status of a candidate country, and the EU should expect it.

The EU offers an ambitious agenda, demanding as well as challenging, for the front-runners. The European Union has to make sure that the strategy will work this time. Brussels institutions and member states have to invite their political capital and will to help the Western Balkans resolve bilateral disputes, deal with and acknowledge the past and help them reach full reconciliation. The EU can no longer be ambiguous or impartial; it should urge Belgrade to resolve (and implement) bilateral disputes with Prishtina, including (de facto) recognition of Kosovo.

The invitation for the Western Balkans countries to participate in the decision shaping at the EU level, a welcome call, should include the WB6. Policies on general affairs, foreign affairs, security, defence, energy, transport affect all Western Balkans countries, not only the front-runners. Regardless of who is on the top or bottom of the list, all Western Balkan countries face one set of problems. Thus, there is no partial solution for the Western Balkans’ largely common problems.

This is a wake-up call for the elites and citizens of the region. Suddenly, the EU has decided to extend its hand, though only partially and very selectively. Yet, nations of the Western Balkans have a loose timeframe and must transform governance, political economy, mentalities and societies. Will they be ready to make the shift? Actions are needed now.

Note: The article is built on the basis of the EU Enlargement draft strategy. Minor amendments are anticipated before its publication on 06 February 2018.

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The Balkans Policy Research Group is an independent, regional think-tank based in Prishtina, Kosovo. We provide timely policy analysis and recommendations on a wide array of state building issues; institutional and democratic consolidation; minority integration and good neighbourly relations: European integration and policy change. We have decades of experience in policy reporting and development, strategic thinking and advocacy with governmental, international and non-governmental organisations.

Our rigorous, detailed, impartial reporting, always based on in-depth fieldwork, is the core of our work. We go beyond mainstream positions and seek to make change through creative, feasible, well-measured and forward-looking policy recommendations with the aim of helping develop strong, vibrant democracies, prosperous states and societies based on rule of law in the Western Balkans.

We engage in high-level advocacy, domestically, regionally and internationally, impacting policy discussions and options with regard to the home affairs and European policies toward the Western Balkans.

Balkans Group has developed other tools and platforms to achieve this change:

The Policy Dialogue promotes Kosovo's domestic dialogue, cohesion and reform-making agenda.

The Policy Forum (a Think-Tankers High-level Advocacy Forum) committed to enhancing the dialogue between the civil society and the institutions.

The Kosovo Serbia Policy Advocacy Group (a forum for Cross-Border Civil Society Cooperation) that aims to communicate, promote and enhance dialogue toward full normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia, and their societies.



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