# The European Union and the Integration of the Western Balkan States

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The roots of the European idea and the creation of the European Community after the Second World War lie in the desire to prevent further war between European states. Thus, one of the main goals of the original idea of European integration is defined as preserving peace among the member states. This concept is currently applied by the EU to the territory of the Western Balkan states: that is that the integration of the region into the EU could help to preserve peace in the region while also providing stability and, consequently, political and economic growth.

In order to stress the regional approach, in 1996 the EU made a differentiation between the ‘South-East (SE) Europe’ and ‘Western Balkans’. ‘SE Europe’ refers to all of the countries from the Gulf of Trieste to the Black Sea, while Western Balkans consists of all of the former Yugoslavian states except Slovenia, plus Albania.

It can be argued that the relations between the EU and the Western Balkans countries are developing and that the EU’s approach to the region is working because it has brought progress as well as cooperation between the conflicted countries. This is especially evident in the bilateral and multilateral meetings organized by or with the EU support where presidents, prime ministers, cabinet ministers or members of parliaments of the regional states meet and take common decisions that are valuable for the whole region. However, more should be done on the level of civil society, where efforts would have a direct impact on citizens.

As it was stated above, the EU has opted for a regional approach to the Western Balkans in order to achieve greater stability among the conflicted states and a normalization of relations between them. Its role is predominantly stabilizing, as each country has applied for, or expressed interest in, acceptance into the European Union. Expressing the desire to avoid further possible conflicts and promote regional cooperation, former Commissioner for Enlargement, Olli Rehn, stated that “the region needs a clear European perspective.” Multilateral political dialogue within the region is usually organized at a high level, through the organization of common meetings with heads of state or at a ministerial level. Although the agenda for the countries of the Western Balkans and the EU is clear, there are still numerous challenges and dilemmas facing the region.

Currently, Montenegro, Serbia, the Republic of North Macedonia, and Albania are official candidates while Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are potential candidate countries. Accession negotiations and chapters have been opened with Montenegro and Serbia. Therefore, the majority of the Western Balkan states are waiting to be integrated into the European Union. However, this process has been referred to as contested or ‘unfinished’ in order to show the problems these countries still face. For example, Kosovo is not recognized by Serbia and five EU Member States; Bosnia and Herzegovina waits for a constitution; Serbia is trying to establish internationally acceptable borders (Kosovo, Republika Srpska); and North Macedonia is involved in a minority-related dispute with Bulgaria which refuses to approve the country’s accession process.

**The Development of the Relations between the EU and the Western Balkan States**

Drawing upon the European Council conclusions on the former Yugoslavia made in February 1996, the EU established a Stabilization and Association Process (SAP) for those countries that did not conclude the association agreement with the EU prior to 1996. Slovenia was the only country from the region that succeeded in catching the European Association Agreement ‘train’ before the establishment of SAP, and subsequently became a candidate for EU membership.

In 1999, the EU launched the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP), a framework for relations between the EU and countries in the region, as well as the Stability Pact, a broader initiative involving all key international players. The Stability Pact was replaced by the Regional Cooperation Council in 2008.

The 2003 European Council in Thessaloniki reaffirmed that all SAP countries were potential candidates for EU membership. This ‘European perspective’ was reaffirmed in the Commission’s February 2018 Western Balkans Strategy and in the declarations following successive EU-Western Balkans Summits.

As noted above, the EU emphasizes the importance of regional cooperation, which has been stressed in numerous European Commission and European Council documents as it was in the most recent Enlargement Strategy, published by the European Commission DG Enlargement and General Affairs Council at the end of 2011. Progress regarding regional cooperation is assessed in the annual progress report of every (potential) candidate country.

The Stabilization and Association Process represents a comprehensive policy framework that was proposed by the European Commission in 1999. It draws upon the regional approach of the EU towards Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Albania and Kosovo. Despite this broad approach, the speed and rate of success on the road to the EU depends on every country individually. The EU maintains direct contract with each country and monitors the progress made in the area of political stability, economic development, and cooperation between the countries in the region, as well as with neighboring countries and with the European Union. Consequently, the EU proceeds with an individual approach to each country based on the situation in each one of them. One important aspect for improving the conditions of a specific Western Balkan state is the willingness of every country in the region to work towards consolidating peace, respecting human rights, the rights of minorities and democratic principles. Because of the legacy of past wars, the EU places particular emphasis on cooperation with neighbors. It consists of the free movements of goods and persons and the provision of services and the development of cross-border projects of common interest.

The Stabilization and Association Process (SAP) is comprised of three aims, which represent the framework for the negotiations between the EU and the Western Balkans countries. These aims include the stabilization of the region and transition to a market economy; the promotion of regional cooperation; and the possible membership in the European Union. The Stabilization and Association Process represents a long-term commitment that consists of stabilization and association agreements, EU financial assistance, and autonomous trade measures. Political effort as well as financial and human resources must be invested in the process.

The central part of the process is the conclusion of a Stabilization and Association Agreement. It entails the establishment of a contractual relationship between the EU and a Western Balkans country, with mutual rights and obligations. The agreement has high political value and will lead to the establishment of a free trade area and to reforms for harmonizing national standards with those of the European Union. A signature on the agreement also means that a country has chosen to become a member of the European Union. Before the country is offered to sign the Stabilization and Association Agreement, there is a preparation period. Formal mechanisms and agreed upon benchmarks from the SAA allow individual countries to implement the reforms and thus comply with EU standards. The reforms are shaped according to EU models. Its key parts are connected to the democratic principles and the EU single market. Through the SAA, the EU guides and monitors the progress of a country towards EU membership. The SAA is not a simple bilateral process between the EU and an individual country, but promotes good neighborly relations and the active development of regional cooperation as a part of the contract as well.

**The Western Balkans Integration Process: Instruments, Current Status, and Challenges**

***The Instruments of Integration***

Launched in 1999, the SAP is the strategic framework supporting the gradual rapprochement of the Western Balkan countries with the European Union. It is based on bilateral contractual relations, financial assistance, political dialogue, trade relations and regional cooperation. Contractual relations take the form of stabilization and association agreements (SAAs). These provide for political and economic cooperation and for the establishment of free trade areas with the countries concerned. Based on common democratic principles, human rights and the rule of law, each SAA establishes permanent cooperation structures. The Stabilization and Association Council, which meets annually at ministerial level, oversees the application and implementation of the agreement concerned. It is assisted by the Stabilization and Association Committee. Finally, a Stabilization and Association Parliamentary Committee (SAPC) ensures cooperation between the Western Balkan countries’ parliaments and the European Parliament.

Since the entry into force of the SAA with Kosovo in April 2016, SAAs are now in force with all Western Balkan candidate and potential candidate countries. In the case of Kosovo, the SAA is an EU-only agreement, which EU Member States do not need to ratify (five Member States do not recognize Kosovo as an independent state). Trade and trade-related aspects of SAAs are included in interim agreements. They generally enter into force swiftly after they have been signed, as trade is an exclusive EU competence.

Applicants for EU membership must fulfil the Copenhagen political criteria. Once a country has been recognized as a candidate, it moves through the various stages of the process at a rate largely dependent on its own merits and progress. A candidate country must adopt and implement all EU legislation, namely the *acquis communautaire*. The European Commission reports on progress in its annual country reports. Every important decision is taken by the European Council, acting by unanimity, from the opening of negotiations to their closure. The accession treaty has to be endorsed by the European Parliament and the Council before being ratified by all contracting states.

Candidate and potential candidate countries receive financial assistance to carry out the necessary reforms. Since 2007, EU pre-accession assistance has been channeled through a single, unified instrument, namely the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA). Most candidate and potential candidate countries may also participate in EU programs.

European integration and regional cooperation are closely intertwined. One of the key aims of the SAP is to encourage countries of the region to cooperate among themselves across a wide range of areas, including the prosecution of war crimes, border issues, refugees and the fight against organized crime. A specific component of the IPA is dedicated to regional cooperation and cross-border programs.

The Sarajevo-based Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), which came into existence in 2008, operates under the guidance of the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP). The RCC aims to support the European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations of its non-EU members, and to develop cooperation in such fields as economic and social development, energy, infrastructure, justice and home affairs, security cooperation, building human capital, and parliamentary relations. The EU and many individual member states support and participate in the Regional Cooperation Council.

Another important regional initiative is the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA). In addition, countries of the Western Balkans participate in a number of regional frameworks.

Visa-free travel to the Schengen area was granted to citizens of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (now the Republic of North Macedonia), Montenegro, and Serbia as of December 2009, and to the citizens of Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina as of November 2010. In January 2012, a visa liberalization dialogue was launched with Kosovo. In July 2018, the Commission confirmed that Kosovo had fulfilled the relevant criterion. Parliament followed suit and decided to enter into inter-institutional negotiations, which are ongoing.

***The Current Status***

Albania

Albania applied for EU membership on 28 April 2009. In 2012, the Commission recommended that the country be granted candidate status, subject to the adoption of pending reforms. In October 2013, the Commission unequivocally recommended granting Albania the status of candidate for EU membership, which it obtained in June 2014. In the light of the country’s progress, the Commission recommended opening accession negotiations with Albania in 2016, 2018 and 2019. In June 2018, the Council agreed to the possible opening of accession negotiations with Albania in June 2019, provided the necessary conditions had been fulfilled. However, both in June 2019 and October 2019, the European Council decided not to greenlight the opening of accession negotiations. In March 2020, the Council finally decided to open accession negotiations, pending the fulfilment of a set of conditions. In July 2020, the Commission presented the draft negotiating framework – the first to take into account the ‘revised methodology for enlargement to the Western Balkans’ that was published in February 2020 – to the member states. Almost one year later, accession negotiations with Albania have not yet been opened.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is a potential candidate country. An SAA was negotiated and signed in June 2008 but its entry into force was frozen, mainly owing to the country’s failure to implement a key ruling of the European Court of Human Rights. The EU’s ‘renewed approach’ to the country, which put more focus on economic governance, allowed the long overdue entry into force of the SAA on 1 June 2015. The country submitted its membership application on 15 February 2016. In May 2019, the Commission published its opinion, including a list of 14 key priorities for BiH, on the basis of BiH’s replies to a comprehensive questionnaire. One of the 14 key priorities is ensuring the proper functioning of the Stabilization and Association Parliamentary Committee (SAPC), the parliamentary dimension of the SAA. In July 2020, almost five years after the first and, so far, only SAPC meeting in November 2015, the BiH Parliament voted on the SAPC’s Rules of Procedure, thereby paving the way for their formal adoption by the SAPC in June 2021.

The Republic of North Macedonia

The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (now the Republic of North Macedonia) applied for EU membership in March 2004 and was granted EU candidate status in December 2005. However, the country was unable to open accession negotiations for many years, mainly owing to the dispute with Greece over the country’s use of the name ‘Macedonia’. This dispute was successfully resolved through the ‘Prespes Agreement’ on the country’s new name – Republic of North Macedonia or North Macedonia – which entered into force in February 2019. Since 2009, the Commission, with the unwavering support of Parliament, had invariably recommended that accession negotiations be opened. In June 2018, the Council agreed to the possible opening of accession negotiations with North Macedonia in June 2019, provided the necessary conditions were fulfilled. However, in both June 2019 and October 2019, the Council did not greenlight the opening of accession negotiations. In March 2020, the Council decided to open accession negotiations without additional conditionality. In July 2020, the Commission presented the draft negotiating framework – the first to take into account the ‘revised methodology for enlargement to the Western Balkans’ – to the member states. Almost one year later, accession negotiations with North Macedonia have not yet been opened. This is mainly due to issues between North Macedonia and Bulgaria related to identity, language and history.

Kosovo

Kosovo is a potential candidate for EU accession. It unilaterally declared its independence in February 2008. Five EU member states (Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain) and two countries in the region (Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina) have not recognized Kosovo’s independence. In July 2018, six years after a visa liberalization roadmap was issued, the Commission confirmed that Kosovo had fulfilled all the relevant criteria. The European Parliament immediately followed suit and entered into inter-institutional negotiations, which are ongoing. In the region, only Kosovo remains excluded from visa liberalization, as some EU member states continue to have reservations. After a landmark agreement on normalizing relations was reached in April 2013 by Belgrade and Pristina (the ‘Brussels Agreement’), the European Council decided in June 2013 to open negotiations on an SAA with Kosovo, which entered into force on 1 April 2016. Kosovo’s future EU integration – like Serbia’s – remains closely linked to the EU-facilitated high-level dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, which should lead to a legally binding comprehensive agreement on the normalization of their relations. The latest high-level dialogue meeting took place on 15 June 2021.

Montenegro

Montenegro, which gained independence in 2006, applied for EU membership in December 2008. It was granted candidate status in December 2010 and accession negotiations were opened in June 2012. In line with the EU’s ‘new approach’ to the accession process, the crucial rule of law chapters – Chapter 23 on judicial reform and fundamental rights and Chapter 24 on freedom, security and justice – were opened at an early stage in the negotiations, in December 2013. To date, all 33 screened negotiating chapters have been opened, of which only three have been provisionally closed. The last remaining key chapter (on competition policy) was opened in June 2020. In its Western Balkans Strategy, published in February 2018, the European Commission stated that Montenegro (and Serbia) could join the EU by 2025, albeit acknowledging that this perspective was ‘extremely ambitious’.

Serbia

Serbia submitted its application for EU membership in December 2009 and was granted candidate status in March 2012 after Belgrade and Pristina reached an agreement on Kosovo’s regional representation. Accession negotiations were formally opened on 21 January 2014. The first two chapters, including the one on normalization of relations with Kosovo, were opened in December 2015. The key rule of law Chapters 23 and 24 were opened on 18 July 2016. To date, 18 out of 35 negotiating chapters have been opened, two of which have been provisionally closed. Since December 2019, no new chapters have been opened. In its Western Balkans Strategy, published in February 2018, the Commission stated that Serbia (and Montenegro) could join the EU by 2025, albeit acknowledging that this perspective was ‘extremely ambitious’. Serbia’s future EU integration – like Kosovo’s – remains closely linked to the EU-facilitated high-level dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo, which should lead to a legally binding comprehensive agreement on the normalization of their relations. The latest high-level dialogue meeting took place on 15 June 2021.

***The Challenges of the Integration Process***

Slovenia entered into the EU in 2007 while Croatia joined the Union in July 2013. However, in 2014 the newly installed European Commission President Jean-Claude Junker stated categorically that the EU would not admit any more countries during his mandate (until 2019), if not indefinitely. The rationale for denying EU accession differs for each Western Balkan country, but the underlying reservations are identical: a country is yet “not prepared” for EU membership; it is “too early” for the EU to accept a new country; or the “cost” of admitting a new member outweighs any benefits that might derive from its accession. These concerns regarding the Western Balkans have only been aggravated following the accession of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007, and the slow pace of political and economic change that has taken place since then. In the opinion of the Enlargement Commissioner, Stefan Fule, “member states and candidate countries have grown tired of the pace of the enlargement process, above all, the accession of Romania and Bulgaria, which raised a lot of questions about the credibility of the process”. Furthermore, over the course of 2015 allegedly more “advanced” EU member countries from Eastern Europe, specifically Poland and Hungary, have been black-sliding politically and economically, making the possible accession of the remaining Western Balkan states even more unpredictably precarious.

European observers have cited several kinds of reservations that have been preventing, or at least delaying, the EU’s readiness to admit the countries of the Western Balkans. Perhaps foremost is the so-called “Enlargement Fatigue.” According to the *Eurobarometer*, in 2013 upwards of 60% of Europeans opposed any further expansion of the EU due to their concern about the Union’s ability to absorb new countries, whether politically or culturally. Second, the Dutch and French rejection of the European Constitution in 2005 was indicative of a broader “Institutional Fatigue” that many European citizens have felt regarding the fundamental political viability of the EU, even absent further expansion. And, most recently, there is increasing recrimination caused by Europe’s “Financial Fatigue,” or the ripple effect of the euro-zone crisis; namely, the resentment felt by many Europeans regarding the cost of bailing out failing economies of member states such as Greece. Of all these areas of concern, economic reservations appear to be most pressing. That is, the greatest challenge faced by representatives of the EU is to justify to their parliaments and constituencies why the union should admit another poor and unqualified Balkan state when this membership will unavoidably result in even greater financial burdens for average citizens of current EU countries.

The urgency aroused by all these concerns has only been further intensified since 2015 by the EU’s inability to formulate a coherent and timely policy for sharing the responsibility and expenses stemming from the thousands of immigrants and refugees from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan who have been coming through both member (Greece) and aspiring states (North Macedonia and Serbia) as they make their way northwards towards Germany and Scandinavia. The concept of a unified “union” is being further challenged by the newest proposal coming from Brussels to seal North Macedonia’s southern border in order to prevent refugees from coming into “Europe” from Greece.

Viewed systemically, there has been an inherent inconsistency in labeling these EU reservations as different forms of “fatigue.” The latter implies a needed period of rest or recovery, which should be followed by a reinvigorated sense of energy and purpose. In other words, if enlargement is an integral instrument of European foreign policy, fatigue should only reflect a temporary respite from an ongoing and predictable process to which all member states are committed. Given the stated policy of delaying further EU expansion at least until 2020, the Union would appear to be experiencing more deeply rooted “rejectionism.” That is, rather than a being temporary digression from its intention to expand, the EU’s promise and then denial or postponement of accession has become a stick more than a carrot in its relationship with the Western Balkan countries. Viewed even more critically, it would not be an exaggeration to claim that Europe is going through an incremental and not too subtle revival of historical prejudices and condescension of northern and western European states and peoples towards their southern and eastern neighbors. This trend is quite evident in the growing presence and strength of right-wing political parties in states such as the Netherlands, Denmark, and Sweden; all previously considered among the most progressive and welcoming countries, but which have been promulgating legislation restricting both the access and rights of immigrants.

And yet, as the EU struggles with these expressions of political, social and economic “fatigue,” North Macedonia, Albania, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo are still expected to meet demanding standards and prerequisites in order to join a club that appears increasingly less convinced that it wants them as members. In principle, EU accession criteria are supposed to apply universally to aspiring countries (for instance, reforming the judiciary, guaranteeing freedom of the media, eradicating corruption, strengthening the rule of law). In practice, however, the EU has applied different and inconsistent accession standards to each country under consideration. This “differentiated integration” policy has become a contentious matter in Balkans, where it is considered to be a double-edged sword: On the positive side, the policy is “flexible,” supposedly allowing each country to meet accession standards at its own pace. On the negative side, however, this policy is perceived as unpredictable at best and as inconsistent and discriminatory at worst.

EU member states are not the only ones having second thoughts about expansion. The most obvious repercussion in the Balkan countries stemming from their postponed or possibly permanent exclusion from the union has been a spreading sense of “Commitment Fatigue.” Despite the rhetoric of many Balkan political elites that joining the EU is their top priority and is ultimately inevitable, there is creeping popular skepticism regarding the EU’s approach to enlargement and its sincerity. Specifically, the peoples of the Balkans are expressing increasingly serious doubts whether they would truly become equal partners in Europe, even should their countries be admitted.

This skepticism has already had significant ramifications in the Balkans: the emergence of “elected” but dubiously legitimate regimes whose domestic policies have been leading their countries into economic decline; the growing frequency of human and civil rights being violated or eliminated; the continued presence if not growth of organized crime; and the increasing numbers of citizens of Western Balkan states who see no future in their home countries and who leave to settle in “Europe” – whether legally or otherwise. Not surprisingly, as “Euro-skepticism,” with its attendant negative consequences, grows in the Balkans, the greater the resistance and reluctance among EU member countries to consider these countries for accession. What should have been a win/win paradigm for the EU and the Balkans has been transformed into a win/lose or possibly a lose/lose scenario.

Perhaps the primary unasked and, therefore, unanswered question is why current EU member states are (or should be) interested in the expansion of the club to which they belong. Namely, before admitting new countries, current members must concur on why enlargement should take place at all, and only then consider the process by which enlargement should take place. EU scholars have identified three primary drivers of expansion that date from the establishment of the European Common Market and which, declaratively, still pertain today. These drivers include: first, protecting shared economies and security; second, strengthening a shared sense of identity; and third, promoting shared “values” or principles. EU enlargement has been complicated, however by two factors: one is the absence of agreement among EU member states as to which of these drivers should take precedence under any particular circumstances; and second, is that the rules or guidelines that aspiring countries are expected to meet have become increasingly ambiguous.

Consequently, rather than being encouraged to establish an authentic domestic demand to adopt and achieve the *substance* of the EU’s membership standards, politician in Western Balkan countries are motivated to go through the motions of adhering to the mechanical criteria of the accession process. Namely, simply by opening chapters of the accession *Acquis,* they can point to their good-faith compliance with the technical demands of accession without needing to demonstrate that they have implemented any substantive or sustainable reforms. In a process that Balkan thinkers describe as the EU “running hot and cold,” countries of the Western Balkans at times are rewarded for meeting certain technical accession criteria, while at the same time they can be penalized for their failure to meet some substantive goal whose importance vis-à-vis technical criteria has not been made explicit.

Whereas the political classes in the Balkans have become adept at identifying and complying with this indeterminate accession process, for the average person in the aspiring countries of Southeastern Europe such back and forth makes the perspective of joining the EU dubious at best. While Brussels blames local political elites for their failure to comply sufficiently with accession criteria, local politicians are able to maintain (if not strengthen) their hold on power by pointing to Brussels for its refusal to recognize the progress that their countries have actually accomplished. This vicious circle serves the interests both within anti-expansion EU member states and among Balkan political classes. Anti-enlargement members of European parliaments can maintain the fiction that they favor a united continent and that they are still sincerely in favor of eventual European expansion, while their actions preclude actual enlargement from taking place. Simultaneously, political elites in the Balkans are able to justify their current domestic policies, arguing that only they have the needs and aspirations of their citizens at heart.

Given these circumstances and attitudes, two fundamental questions face decision makers both in the EU and the countries of the Western Balkans. First, whether there is a viable solution to this accession impasse. More specifically, is it necessary for the EU to redefine the purpose of accession, and then to retool how it is structured? The second question is what might be the consequences, both to Southeastern Europe and to the EU, should the countries of the Western Balkans remain in their current state of limbo for a prolonged if not indefinite period of time. In short, can the EU and the Western Balkans to find a way to revise the process that the European Stability Initiative calls “the staircase to nowhere”?

A summary of arguments for and against EU enlargement illustrates that the two lines of reasoning differ in their very essence. Arguments in favor of expansion are value oriented, stressing the goal of promoting shared ideals and furthering the vision of Europe as a unified continent living in peace and prosperity. Arguments against expansion are technocratic, emphasizing the current difficulties in managing the EU with its 27 member states and warning how much more difficult, complex and expensive it would be to administer the EU if additional countries were admitted. Put otherwise, arguments favoring enlargement focus on the purpose of the EU - *what* it is meant to be and *why* it should expand. In contrast, arguments against expansion concentrate on *if* and *how* this process should take place. This uneasy intersection of purpose versus process has been bedeviling the countries of the Western Balkans as they try to comply with Brussels’ accession demands.

When average citizens of Balkan countries imagine belonging to the EU, their vision is of increased prosperity, hopefully aligned to some extent with the economies of countries they know best: often Germany or Sweden. The majority of Balkan people who are immigrating to the EU are motivated by their poor domestic economy and less so by their dissatisfaction with domestic politics. Put more generally, rarely do people from North Macedonia, Albania or Bosnia declare that their desire to join the EU is driven by a desire to strengthen the rule of law in their home country, to guarantee the freedom of their domestic media, or to create mechanisms that assure food safety standards or environmental protection.

At the same time, however, people of the Balkans are resentful that the EU seemingly considers their societies to be somehow inferior, and which need to transform themselves not only economically but also structurally before they merit membership in the European Union. For instance, Brussels tends to view Balkan societies as endemically corrupt, despite the fact that as many Germans consider their own politicians to be corrupt as do people in Serbia or Albania. Doubtlessly, North Macedonians, for instance, recognize that corruption is a serious problem in their state. What they do not see, however, is how the EU’s demands are helping to reduce corruption; nor how following the dictates of the EU would improve daily life in Skopje. The majority of people throughout the Balkans are convinced that their countries’ membership in the EU would more effectively lead to the reduction of corruption because the union would have the leverage to convince (or compel) their politicians and institutions to conform to EU standards. This is leverage that the EU apparently does not now have, other than the continual delaying of accession. For its part, the EU maintains that as long as corruption has not been curbed, countries do not qualify for admittance, either technically or substantively. As a result, “creative tension” between the EU and the Western Balkans has been erased. In other words, there is little motivation for aspiring states to engage in meaningful and enduring reform, where progress towards mutually agreed-upon accession benchmarks would be recognized and rewarded by Brussels. Rather, the tension is based on punishment, where failure to meet the EU’s expectations results in further postponement of accession. This, in turn, allows Balkan political classes to justify their inaction and to continue with self-serving policies that *a priori* prevent their countries from meeting accession criteria.

**Recent Developments**

The 2021 EU-Western Balkans Summit in Brdo, hosted by the Slovenian presidency of the Council, was a testimony of the EU’s strategic engagement with the Western Balkans. It came after the 2018 EU-Western Balkans Summit in Sofia and the 2020 EU-Western Balkans Summit in Zagreb.

The Summit came after over nineteen months of fighting a pandemic. During that period, the EU stood by the Western Balkan states demonstrating its solidarity with an unprecedented package of €3.3 billion in financial assistance, associating the region with its emergency management mechanisms and sharing almost 3 million doses of vaccines, in addition to those received by the region from COVAX.

European CommissionPresident Ursula von der Leyen visited all six Western Balkans countries a week before the Brdo Summit, passing important messages of partnership and solidarity across the region, while reaffirming the Commission’s clear commitment to advance accession and towards full EU integration. The European Commission President called on all six partners to strengthen their regional cooperation and economic integration, as well as to reap full benefits of the Economic and Investment Plan.

At the Brdo Summit, the leaders of the Western Balkan countries and the EU officials reaffirmed the region’s European perspective and commitment to the enlargement process, based upon credible reforms by partners, fair and rigorous conditionality, and the principle of own merits. In the Brdo Summit’s declaration, the EU officials agreed to take forward the Economic and Investment Plan, bringing concrete deliverables of the EU’s engagement in the region, and set out shared EU–Western Balkans priorities for the coming years to advance together towards more innovative, greener, and digital economies. At the same time, the leaders of the Western Balkan countries committed to enhancing cooperation on core security issues to keep citizens safe.

The EU will step up investments in the Western Balkans to spur the long-term recovery and foster regional integration and convergence with the European Union. The almost €30 billion Economic and Investment Plan (EIP) for the region proposed by the Commission exactly a year ago remains the EU’s blueprint for financial engagement in the Western Balkans aimed at closing their socioeconomic gap with the European Union. It focuses on strategic investments in the region’s transport and energy networks, green and digital agenda, support to the private sector and building a Common Regional Market based on EU rules to unleash the region’s economic potential and make it more attractive to investors.

To kick-start the Plan’s implementation, the Commission proposed to increase to €1.1 billion this year’s allocation for the Plan. €600 million of funds announced today come on top of the €500 million announced in the Summit in July under the Berlin process.

The Brdo Summit produced the following results:

* A dedicated *Agenda on  Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport* for the region, which will promote scientific excellence, reform the region’s education systems, reinforce opportunities for the youth and the cultural sector, and help prevent brain drain.
* A detailed action plan agreed by the Western Balkan partners for the implementation of the ambitious goals of the *Green Agenda***,** focused on reducing pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, managing an energy transition, putting in place a circular economy, supporting the protections of biodiversity and advancing  sustainable farming and food production.
* Endorsement of a recent *rail action plan* for the region.
* Preparation of a ***roadmap for the voluntary reduction of roaming charges*** between the EU and the Western Balkans, following the entry into force of the regional agreement introducing roam-like-at-home regime between the six last July.
* Agreement to *enhance cooperation between the EU and Western Balkan partners on core security issues*, in areas such as hybrid threats and disinformation, cyber, space issues, military mobility and counterterrorism, together with continued support for countering illicit firearms trafficking.
* Enhanced regular political dialogue with the region and the holding of EU-Western Balkans Summits as regular events.

At the conclusion of the Brdo Summit, Ursula von der Leyen stated that

“the Western Balkans is part of the same Europe as the European Union. We share the same history, we share the same interests, the same values, and, I am deeply convinced, also the same destiny. The European Union is not complete without the Western Balkans. So my Commission will continue to do its utmost to advance the enlargement process and the region’s EU integration. We want the Western Balkans in the European Union.  There cannot be any doubt that our goal is enlargement.”

The Commission President argued that the Economic and Investment Plan is crucial for the development and the deeper integration of the common regional market and that the market integration will be as beneficial to the Western Balkans as the Single Market is to the European Union. Therefore, the EU’s focus is now on developing this common regional market.

On the issues of reform, von der Leyen stated that the countries in Western Balkans are undertaking important reforms and although they are there yet, there is obviously a lot of progress visible. She added that it is important to stay the course in key areas such as justice, the fight against corruption and organised crime, media freedom and economic reforms. At the same time, the EU, according to von der Leyen also has to deliver. In particular, the lack of a decision for opening the negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania is jeopardising the EU’s standing and leverage in the region. Therefore, it has been identified as of being of great importance to move forward on and clarify this process, as well as address outstanding differences among the Western Balkan states.

Following the meeting between EU High Representative Josep Borrell and U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, the EU and the United States agreed to further strengthen their joint engagement in the Western Balkans in support of the region’s progress on its European path. They

underscored their full support for the EU’s enlargement process, while EU accession, a stated priority for the whole Western Balkans, was seen as assisting the consolidation of democratic institutions, protect fundamental rights, and advance the rule of law. They also viewed closer integration as enhancing the stability and contribute to prosperity for the people of the region. In this context, the EU and the U.S. stressed that accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia should start without delay. The EU and the U.S. also expressed their firm support for the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as in their joint work to promote electoral and constitutional reform and maintain the functionality of its state institutions. To this end, they expressed their serious concerns about increasingly divisive rhetoric in Bosnia and Herzegovina and called on all parties to respect and protect state institutions, resume constructive dialogue, and take steps to advance progress on the EU integration path – including on relevant reforms. The EU and the U.S. also expressed their readiness to facilitate these steps and stressed the importance of the EU-facilitated Dialogue, which is the key mechanism to address the comprehensive normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo. The two parties encouraged both Serbia and Kosovo to engage in continued and sustained de-escalation and avoid actions that threaten stability. They also expressed their support Kosovo’s engagement to fight corruption and organized crime, and reiterated that violence against civilians, journalists, police, or other authorities is unacceptable. Finally, the EU and the U.S. called on all political forces in Montenegro to work together to maintain a strategic orientation that reflects the desire of the people of Montenegro to achieve the reforms necessary to make their hopes for a future in the EU a reality.

**As a Conclusion**

To overcome the challenges of the integration process discussed above, the EU and the aspiring countries of the Western Balkans must come to a mutually acceptable agreement that aligns purpose with process. EU countries are justifiably concerned about the implications of admitting new members whose economies and politics are not sufficiently underdeveloped to warrant decades-long attention and support. This is particularly true in the current context of unprecedented levels of immigration and doubts about the future of the common European currency. Nonetheless, far-sighted politicians recognize the benefits that European unity has brought to the continent since World War II and they are not dissuaded by present obstacles from seeing the potential demographic, economic and political advantages of further expansion. However, this view also recognizes that inaction comes at a price: that is, keeping the Western Balkans out of the EU has as many consequences as does admitting these countries to the union, whether or not they are fully “prepared.”

Numerous scenarios have been considered for what may happen should the countries of the Western Balkans remain outside the union indefinitely; and none of these is advantageous for the European Union. At a minimum, inaction would lead to a growing *black hole* in South Eastern Europe: that is, continuing the *status quo* in the excluded Balkan states would further their downward economic and political spiral, which – among other things – would facilitate the concomitant influence of organized crime and encourage further unregulated migration.

Due to the possible domino effects of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the developing situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, armed conflict is now a significant possibility. For example, Serbia, as the largest of these Balkan states, has a long history of pan-Slavism, and has been an ally of Russia since the waning of the Ottoman Empire. And though Putin’s Russia is not the Russian Empire of the late 19th century, it is still an option for Serbia to align itself with other relatively powerful Orthodox Slavs rather than remaining unaligned. Similarly, Turkey has been developing economic and cultural interests in the Balkans (and elsewhere through Central Asia). Without delving into the complications of Turkey’s attempts to gain admittance to the EU, an alliance of Turkey with North Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo, and Bosnia is not out of the question. Of these, Macedonia and Albania have a particularly positive view of the US, and may opt to cultivate a primary trans-Atlantic partnership. In each of these scenarios, the EU has its political and economic significance diminished.

For their part, Balkan politicians could decide to relinquish their absolute hold on power, and to make sincere efforts at meeting the accession demands that the EU has defined. Most observers of the Balkans would dismiss this possibility as unfeasible. What is feasible, however, is for the EU to redirect its attention and resources towards other voices and constituencies in South Eastern Europe; members of society who share an aspiration for EU membership rather than a desire for personal gain. The list that follows is but a short synthesis of some of the steps that both the EU and the countries of the Western Balkans could take to reach a common goal by aligning process and purpose.

First, if enlargement does become an instrument of European foreign policy, the EU needs to rely more on positive rather than negative reinforcement practices to motivate aspiring countries to meet accession standards. Not only have punitive actions, such as reducing IPA funding, failed to accelerate reforms, they have motivated local elites to continue engaging in policies that serve their own agendas to the detriment of their country’s economic and political future.

Second, the relationship between the EU and Balkan elites needs to be revisited. At present, the EU negotiates the accession process largely with the elites of the Western Balkans, to the exclusion of civil society and other local leaders who have their own voices and constituencies. By engaging more with leaders who are not beholden to the current political classes, Brussels would increase local ownership both of the way towards and the specific outcomes of the accession process; and improve the chances of these states meeting accession standards by stimulating greater society-wide demands for positive change.

Third, one highly contentious area is the ambiguity of the discourse between Brussels and the countries of the Western Balkans. To avoid misunderstandings and the controversies that stem from them, the EU should use specific and clear language to define which issues the Western Balkan states need to address. Absent specific terminology, people in the aspiring countries cannot determine whether or not real progress has been made. Furthermore, the prevalence of ambiguous terminology only reinforces the scope for local politicians to blame Brussels for not accepting achievements that they claim to have achieved.

Fourth, accurate terminology to capture progress in the accession process must be accompanied by accurate, reliable and accessible data. Therefore, the EU should put into place a consistent system of statistical data collection and analysis that applies equally to all aspiring countries. Rewarding countries for providing consistent and accurate data would allow everyone engaged in the accession process to see how any given country is doing at a particular time; motivate officials in the aspiring countries who are tasked with accession to collect, analyze and make public honest statistical information; and make possible meaningful comparisons of progress among aspiring countries.

By combining specific and clear terminology with accurate, consistent and accessible data in its annual progress reports, the EU could set clear and achievable accession benchmarks; elevate the credibility of its arguments regarding the rate of progress towards benchmarks that have been identified by all parties; define realistic minimal standards that must be reached for any country to have its progress acknowledged; set specific minimal accession standards for each specific issue an aspiring country needs to address; and respond to criticism or objections by Balkan countries regarding inaccuracies or mistakes they identify in reviews of their progress.

To summarize, the EU has to behave as though both the present and the future of the Western Balkans actually matter. The refugee/immigrant debacle has been testing the very notion of a union of member states. It has reignited the debate over sovereignty and the right of member states to define domestic policies that do not necessarily adhere to policies set by Brussels. As it happens, the countries of the Western Balkans are surrounded by member states on all sides. Consequently, events taking place in any country of the region impact all countries of the region – members and non-members alike. The EU therefore cannot ignore or downplay events occurring in non-member Balkan countries, which undermine the very standards that the EU claims to represent. For example, Brussels must inform any Balkan government immediately that shutting down independent media or jailing journalists has direct and immediate negative ramifications for accession. Likewise, Brussels cannot declare any Balkan election to be “adequate” when both domestic and international observers are aware that the process was manipulated with impunity to maintain the ruling oligarchs’ rein on power. The role of the EU must be to encourage Balkan aspirations for membership by assisting countries to understand why and how the Union’s values will improve the standard of living both for each country and for the union as a whole. However, Brussels cannot expect threats of exclusion to force the countries of the Western Balkans to transform themselves into Northern or Western European societies as the price for admission to the club. There must be room for a more inclusive definition of “Europe,” with membership criteria that are achievable for countries whose histories, cultures and aspirations compliment but do not imitate their neighbors to the north.