

EU Enlargement Policy in the Western Balkans: The Need for a New Sense of Urgency

Written summary of workshop presentation

- The EU perspective for the states – and societies – of the Western Balkans is today further away than still a few years ago. (Potential) accession candidates are indeed making formal progress in the Stabilisation and Association Process. However, due to multiple crises within the EU skepticism towards new enlargements has risen in member states (1); at the same time, political reforms and in certain cases also stabilization efforts in the Western Balkans have stalled, with an urgent need for more decisive EU action in the region (2).

1. Growing opposition to enlargement (policy) in EU capitals

- The *raison d'être* of the EU's enlargement policy – to foster stability as well as political and economic transformation in the region – is still topical. However, there is a lack of awareness among (certain) member states for the strategic importance of the Western Balkans' EU integration.
- Member states merely pay lip-service to the accession promise which encounters growing domestic opposition. There is a core group of member states striving to keep enlargement policy on the agenda, while others are skeptical to indifferent. Ironically, the EU summit between EU and Western Balkan leaders in Sofia in May 2018 did not deal with the question of enlargement or EU integration.
- At the same time, in the frame of the so-called “Berlin process” a small group of member states is striving to provide new momentum to the Western Balkans' EU integration and foster regional cooperation among (potential) candidates – yearly summits were/are to be held in Berlin (2014), Vienna (2015), Paris (2016), Trieste (2017), London (2018), Poznan (2019). While EU decision-making in the area of enlargement policy is subject to unanimity, we can thus observe an informal way of differentiation, with a core group of member states driving forward the region's EU integration.

2. EU action in the Western Balkans: Beyond the symbolic – towards a “bolder” and more systematic approach

- Growing skepticism in EU capitals is partly related to multiple crises within the EU and domestic constraints. Another reason however can be found in developments in the region itself: democratic backsliding, authoritarian tendencies and state capture; the persistence of state-building problems and bilateral disputes; a very difficult socio-economic situation.
- The EU perspective is particularly far away for citizens. It has often been observed, and rightly so, that the benefits of EU integration are not felt by citizens in the region.

Consequently, there is a very high degree of frustration and lack of perspective prevailing among the population. Many citizens have lost hope that further EU integration, if it occurs, will improve their quality of life. One result of this lack of (EU) perspective is the massive migration of citizens from the Western Balkans but also the new member state Croatia that has reached a new peak (in 2017 alone, 47 000 people left Croatia, i.e. around one percent of the population).

- The EU contributes by far the biggest share of financial aid to the region and there is a wide range of EU-supported projects and initiatives in all areas. However, EU action needs to make sure to go beyond the formal and symbolic level. We reflexively need to ask how to achieve a broad and systematic impact, how to ensure that EU rules find their way from paper to practice. Two examples: hesitance of EU actors when it comes to naming and sanctioning infringements to democratic standards and the rule of law in the Western Balkans; limited outreach of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office.
- There is a need for more courageous action from the EU side that would allow for structural changes. A few ideas (list non-exhaustive):
 - Open cohesion funds and other EU programmes to accession candidates. This would increase financial support to the Western Balkans by more than 10 times. At the same time, access to increased funding would be conditional upon significant progress in rule of law-related reforms¹;
 - Reform the EC's annual country reports for the Western Balkan states: future reports should avoid vague, bureaucratic and coded language and provide a clear assessment of a country's performance in main reform areas, so that citizens get a concise picture of their government's performance with regard to EU integration;
 - Launch a large-scale Europe-wide programme to transform brain drain in (South) Eastern Europe into brain circulation.

Conclusion

- It would be a dangerous illusion to believe that the EU has plenty of time in the Western Balkans, with the accession process lasting for nearly two decades now and further accessions not being imminent or even a distant perspective for certain (potential) candidates. Other powers, above all China, Russia and Turkey, are yielding to extend their influence in the region; the blatant lack of perspective for citizens could become a destabilizing factor in itself; and the accession perspective provided by EU member states is less and less credible. If the EU does not act more decisively, it will thus (further) lose its leverage on the region.

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¹ See for instance Pierre Mirel, The Western Balkans: between Stabilisation and Integration in the European Union, Fondation Robert Schuman, European Issue nr 459, 02/2018.

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