



IS A NEW PATH TO ENLARGEMENT POSSIBLE?

A LOOK AT THE PROPOSALS FOR STAGED ACCESSION

ABSTRACT

This policy brief analyses the most relevant proposals – developed both within the European institutions and by independent research centres – on the staged accession methodology for the EU enlargement process toward the Western Balkans.

It also includes a summary of the discussion held at the network meeting of Friends of the Western Balkans in June 2023, putting together the different positions emerged, the uncertainties declared, and the new proposals developed during the discussion. Finally, the policy brief highlights the strengths and weaknesses of the proposal, indicating which aspects can be improved.



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Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has been a real factor of destabilisation within the European institutions and the subsequent application for EU membership by Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia has given a new impetus for renewal to a so-far-stagnant process.

On 28 February 2022, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky appealed to the European Union for "an immediate accession of Ukraine by special procedure".¹ The European Council's decision came in record time, granting candidate country status to Ukraine and Moldova on 23 June 2022 – while Georgia will first have to meet some conditions and introduce several reforms.²

The historic decision of the European Council has brought to the fore the debate on the accession of the countries of the Western Balkans, which have been waiting too long for their demands to be accepted. On 19 July 2022, accession negotiations officially began with Albania and North Macedonia, which had obtained candidate country status in 2014 and 2005 respectively,³ while on 15 December 2022, Bosnia-Herzegovina was finally granted candidate country status after applying in 2016, and Kosovo officially submitted its application for membership.⁴

Therefore, a debate was opened on how to implement the accession process of these countries, finding a meeting point between the need for a strategic and immediate response to an exceptional situation and the need not to lower European accession standards.

During the Conference for the Future of Europe on 9 May 2022 in Strasbourg, French President Emmanuel Macron proposed the establishment of the European Political Community (EPC)

as a "new space for political and security cooperation"⁵ a project that recalls the 1989 proposal of the then French President, François Mitterrand, on the creation of a confederation of EU and non-EU states. Macron specified that the new EPC does not aim to substitute the accession mechanism, but it would be a platform where countries 'associated' to the EU can discuss security, energy and connectivity issues, an opportunity hitherto exclusive to the EU member states. According to Macron, the EPC would therefore overcome the binary criterion (in/out) which characterises the current accession process.

The proposal was met with general coldness, especially from Albania and North Macedonia who fear being trapped in a waiting room with no exit and from some EU member states – such as Italy – particularly active in supporting integration.⁶ Actually, it is not clear what benefits the EPC could bring to the countries of the Western Balkans in terms of membership. Indeed, the EPC could facilitate dialogue and political cohesion with those countries which are not prepared to join the EU but simply want a special relationship – such as the UK or Turkey. But for those struggling to enter, the EPC would not bring any concrete help to solve the impasse.

However, the inaugural meeting of the EPC was held in Prague on 6 October 2022, and included the 27 EU members states and the Western Balkans countries plus Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.⁷ The main topics were peace and security, and the energy crisis. On that occasion, the European Council clarified that the EPC was intended as a bi-annual informal "platform for political coordination".⁸

Well before Macron's proposal for an EPC, several analysts and scholars proposed a structural reform of the accession process



The revised accession process is structured into steps that countries must reach, each one granting new benefits and incentives to move on.



to guarantee a gradual integration of the candidate countries in the European structures and policies. The revised accession process is structured into steps that countries must reach, each one granting new benefits and incentives to move on. This is the so-called 'staged accession'.

The current accession process

Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) provides the legal basis for the admission of new member states. Currently, the process of accession is divided into the following steps:

- The country interested in joining the European Union formally applies for membership to the Council Presidency.⁹
- In order to obtain a positive opinion from the Commission, the country must demonstrate compliance with the values included in Article 2 of the TEU: respect for human dignity, democracy, freedom, equality, the rule of law and human rights. The Commission should also take into account the presence of the economic, political and legal eligibility criteria – the so-called Copenhagen criteria, established at the 1993 Copenhagen European Council – which include:
 1. The presence of stable institutions capable of guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights and protection of minorities, in line with the values listed in Article 2 of the TUE.
 2. A reliable market economy capable of coping with competition within the EU.
 3. The ability to accept the obligations of membership, such as the ability

to effectively implement the body of Community law – the so-called *acquis* – and to fulfil the Union's political, economic and monetary objectives.

- Having obtained the positive opinion of the Commission, the European Council votes unanimously to grant the status of candidate country.
- The Commission, therefore, recommends that the European Council start accession negotiations, which will be opened following the unanimous vote of the members of the Union.
- Then the negotiations open and the candidate country is guided in the implementation of the reforms required for accession.
- Once the negotiation phase is complete, the Accession Treaty is signed, and then approved by the European Parliament and the European Council unanimously.
- For the Western Balkan countries, a Stabilisation and Association Process was envisaged in 2000, with the aim of stabilising the region in view to future enlargement. The point of arrival of this Process is the signing of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement, a bilateral agreement with which the candidate countries is committed to adopt the necessary reforms to bring its legislation in line with the *acquis communautaire*, while the European Union is committed to provide technical assistance and finance for the implementation of these reforms, as well as ensuring access to free trade areas.

On 5 February 2020, in order to overcome the impasse of the Western Balkan countries, stuck in a grey zone between candidate status and the actual accession, the European Commission laid out its proposal for "a more credible, dynamic, predictable and political EU accession process".¹⁰ The proposal is based on the revised methodology by the European

Enlargement Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi, who organised the negotiating chapters into thematic clusters. Clusters are based on the themes of good governance, internal market, economic competitiveness and connectivity, and allow to identify the most important and urgent reforms to be undertaken in each sector. Negotiations on each cluster shall start simultaneously after the achievement of required benchmarks. According to Várhelyi, this setup is supposed to speed up the process: a chapter could be closed in one year, compared to the six/eight years that it currently takes. Várhelyi's objective was to develop a "stronger political steer" increasing the political dialogue through regular EU-Western Balkans summits. According to the Commissioner, the priority is to encourage reforms making the required conditions clearer and more concise, and providing "clear and tangible incentives of direct interest to citizens".

However, according to some experts, the revised methodology presents several strategic problems such as the lack of tailored country-specific methods to measure the progress of a target country or the insufficient involvement of civil society in the reform procedures.¹¹

The staged accession

On 18 May 2022, on the occasion of the plenary session of the European Economic and Social Committee, the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, made clear for the first time the prospect of a "faster, gradual and reversible" integration process.¹² The proposal lies, as the President explained, on the necessity "to create new impetus to encourage reforms and further European integration".

The proposal provides a 'gradual integration' in which candidate countries can reach "tangible socio-economic benefits" during the accession negotiation and the possibility to be "actively involved in an advisory capacity in the work of the Council of Minister", when the target country meets the required standards in a

given sector. The innovation is the reversibility of the process: the plan provides a withdrawal of the gained benefits in case of a country's backsliding on the rule of law.

In June 2022, the European Council agreed to invite "the Commission, the High Representative and the Council to further advance the gradual integration between the European Union and the region already during the enlargement process itself in a reversible and merit-based manner" adding that the new EPC will not replace the accession process.¹³

The staged accession anticipated by Michel is not new: at the level of the European institutions, it is a topic that has already been discussed informally on the occasion of the publication of two non-papers, the French one of 2019 and the Austrian one of 2022.

In fact, the reflection on a reform of the accession process started in 2019 with the non-paper sent by the French government following the European Council of 19 October, when Denmark, France and the Netherlands vetoed the opening of negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia.¹⁴ The French non-paper proposed a reform of the accession process to support the countries of the Western Balkans in their reforms path to conform to the European *acquis*.¹⁵ The renewed approach was based on four principles to make the accession process more gradual and incentivising.¹⁶

1. *Gradual association*: negotiations will enable gradual access to the European Union policies and programmes. They should not be based on the simultaneous opening of the chapters, but on a seven-step process that will allow candidate countries to access EU programmes and funds on the basis of the reached criteria before arriving at full membership.
2. *Stringent conditions*: to assure the countries effectively converge toward European standards, the criteria for moving from

one stage to the next should be objectively verifiable in terms of adoption and effective implementation. Progression will be based on irreversible progress on the rule of law.

3. *Tangible benefits*: each step will qualify countries for increasing financial support and access to a share of structural funds for the exclusive use of member states.
4. *Reversibility*: in case the candidate state ceases to fulfil its commitments, the European Union will proceed with gradual penalties, from the suspension of the benefits to a step backward in the process, to a general suspension.

The idea of staged accession has been fully supported by Pierre Mirel, former Director for the Western Balkans at the European Commission, who developed the French idea on the gradual association based on the reforms further adding a final consolidation phase.¹⁷ The staged accession would develop as follows:

- The first step provides the implementation of the association agreements and some symbolic reforms, incentivised by the reception of a fraction of the structural funds.
- The second step provides the integration of the country into the internal market. Each step further would give access to more funds and to the work of the Commission and the Council, initially only as an observer and then as a country entitled to vote. Conversely, backsliding would be financially sanctioned.
- Once the criteria for membership are met, the candidate can enter the final stage of consolidation in which the accession country will enjoy the rights connected with membership, except for the veto right, and it will not have a Commissioner.

Mirel justifies this further waiting time with the need to assess whether the reforms have actually been implemented and internalised

by the country system, in order to avoid a possible recession on the rule of law. The end of this intermediate phase will result in full membership. However, neither the duration of this phase nor the practical arrangements for monitoring the implementation of the *acquis communautaire* have been clarified.

In June 2022, the Austrian Foreign Minister, Alexander Schallenberg, and the Austrian Minister for European Affairs, Karoline Edtstadler, sent to the Foreign Ministers of the EU member states a non-paper containing the proposal for a "gradual integration".¹⁸ In this case, the gradual integration would allow the candidate country to have a greater say in certain areas of common interest such as energy, transport infrastructure and research, and to regularly attend the EU Council meetings. The project moves in the direction of relaunching the credibility of the European institutions among the candidate Western Balkan countries, which may feel they are treated like 'second-class candidate countries' compared to Ukraine and Moldova for which the waiting times have been very different.¹⁹

However, in light of the reticence with which the non-paper was received, Schallenberg hastened to reiterate that the proposal does not want to go in the direction of a reform of the accession process.²⁰

Contributions to the debate on staged accession

Beyond the informal initiatives of national governments, a well-defined and structured reflection on the prospect of a staged accession as a concrete solution to the stalemate in the Western Balkans accession process seems to be missing within the European Union.

Among the private initiatives of several national and international think tanks, however, the proposal is finding fertile ground for new elaborations.



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The first elaboration of a complete and comprehensive Staged Accession Methodology was made in October 2021 by the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) in Brussels and the European Policy Center (CEP) in Belgrade.²¹ The proposal introduces a four-stage process: each stage gives access to different benefits for candidate countries which have successfully increased their level of preparedness for membership. The setting of clear and robust benchmark for progress through the stages aims at creating a more predictable and merit-based accession path.

- Stages 1 and 2 are 'pre-accession' stages. The candidate country's progress under the 33 negotiating chapters will be assessed quantitatively. Each progress leads to advantages in terms of progressive participation in EU policy and access to funding.
- In Stage 3 the country that has met all the requirements for access will be designated as a 'new member state' in a Treaty of Accession. However, the integration of the country is not complete, but subject to specific restrictions in the use of voting power in the Council, as it will be able to count only on qualified majority.
- In Stage 4 the country is guaranteed full membership and full enjoyment of all rights derived from it.

The CEPS-CEP's proposal also provides an additional waiting room between Stage 3 and

4. It arises from the need to reassure those member states that are more sceptical about the possible risks that further enlargement would entail in terms of governability of the EU – especially regarding Poland and Hungary's abuse of veto power in the 2000s. Again, it is unclear either how long this wait should last or what criteria are required to move to the following stage.

In 2023, CEPS and CEP developed a new proposal called "Template 2.0 for Staged Accession", in which the authors proposed a new methodology based on a horizontal progression, rather than a sectoral approach: countries must increase their average cluster performance, rather than achieving a high level of preparedness in each chapters.²² The new proposal also includes new considerations related to the institutional participation of the candidate countries and the allocation of fund in the different stages. Finally, the proposal provides a 'safeguard clause' in the post-accession period, in order to meet the request for guarantees about the risk of democratic backsliding.

Michael Roth, Chairman of the German Bundestag Foreign Affairs Committee, proposes a reform in six points:²³

1. Representatives of the candidate countries that make sufficient progress in the field of the rule of law should take part in the European Council meetings.
2. The EU should assure candidate countries a closer cooperation in the areas of security, energy and infrastructure, and a gradual accession to the European single market.
3. Pre-accession financial assistance should be increased in order to support candidate countries' efforts.²⁴
4. The role of Western Balkans civil society should be strengthened through compulsory consultation procedures.

5. The EU member states should take on sponsorship for candidate countries, providing technical and political support.
6. The opening and closing of negotiation chapters should be decided by a qualified majority rather than the current unanimity.

A report by the international think tank European Stability Initiative (ESI) states that the only way to revive the EU accession process is to offer full access to the single market and the four fundamental freedoms – free movement of goods, capitals, services and people – to all candidate countries that meet the criteria of respect of human rights and the rule of law.²⁵ According to ESI, this would help to set achievable goals and perspectives for candidate countries, that will be encouraged to adopt the required reforms, without affecting the EU decisional process.



Over time, the EU acquis has become more complex and extensive, making the entry conditions more and more specific and rigorous.



Milena Lazarević, Programme Director of the above-mentioned European Policy Center (EPC), reflects that such structural reforms require time to be embedded and made irreversible in the national system. Moreover, over time, the EU *acquis* has become more complex and extensive, making the entry conditions more and more specific and rigorous.²⁶ Consequently, the bar for achieving membership has risen. Therefore, she proposes to "render the point of accession less formidable" and describes three fundamental directions:

1. To make the access gradual and conditional with the achievement of reform benchmarks.
2. To design a tailor-made sanctioning mechanism, by which the EU can punish lack of progress and backsliding.

3. To create a comprehensive monitoring and reporting mechanism, implemented by the European Commission.

Regarding the sanctioning mechanism, the severity of measures imposed would depend on the gravity of the breach of the fundamental membership criteria – rule of law, economic governance and public administration. Sanctions would go from an enhanced oversight to the freezing of part of funding, to the suspension of voting rights in the Council.

The monitoring mechanism should recall the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) introduced for Bulgaria and Romania at the time of their accession, in consideration of their weaknesses in specific rule of law areas. CVM included a post-accession oversight by the Commission, which reported to the Council the achievement of rule of law reforms. Lazarević specifies that the main weaknesses of the CVM were the "limited penalizing power of the sanctions" and the absence of "advancement rewards". Once a country becomes a member, there are not sufficient incentives to undertake the required changes. To summarise, Lazarević proposes a "stick and carrot mechanism", made of sanctions and benefits, when the reform process is supported by an assistance package based on expert peer support, which also draws on the expertise of civil society.

Lights and shadows of staged accession

All these proposals try to replace the 'in or out' approach to integration, introducing different accession stages corresponding to benefits in terms of progressive participation and access to EU structural funds. Progresses made by candidate states will be evaluated on the basis of given benchmarks, and criteria to upgrade from a stage to the next one will be clear, robust and measurable.

A point on which all experts agree is that the process needs to be reversible. A monitoring mechanism and a sanctioning mechanism are

provided in order to punish any backslidings and lack of progress. This would accelerate accession progress, both for the countries that have to adopt the reforms and for the EU bodies called to assess the progress. In this regard, it is strictly necessary to set precise deadlines for each stage to be completed.

Some authors propose a gradual integration in political terms – through the participation to Council meetings as observer or as entitled to vote – and in economic terms – through the access to internal market and the four fundamental freedoms (albeit with some reservations) and a closer cooperation in sectors of common interest such as energy, security and infrastructures.

Both Mirel and CEPS-CEP suggest the provision of an additional final stage before full membership. A sort of waiting room to evaluate whether the reforms are totally embedded in the social and political system of the candidate state. Finally, in order to speed up the process and avoid political exploitation, Roth suggests that the opening and closing of negotiation chapters would be decided by qualified majority votes in the EU Council, rather than unanimity.

A reform of the enlargement process in the direction of a staged accession could be the solution to the stagnation of the Western Balkans' journey toward EU membership. But the concern of many experts is that local leaders, receiving benefits and funding during the negotiation process, may not be encouraged to undertake reforms that are undoubtedly costly from an economic and political point of view. For this reason, it is essential that the staged accession strictly follows two criteria:

1. Each step must be clear and well-defined in terms of objectives to be achieved, in order to measure and control results.



A reform of the enlargement process in the direction of a staged accession could be the solution to the stagnation of the Western Balkans' journey toward EU membership. But the concern of many experts is that local leaders, receiving benefits and funding during the negotiation process, may not be encouraged to undertake reforms.



2. Each step must be completed within a precise timeframe, otherwise, the defaulting country will face severe sanctions.

The time limit will also be a warning for the EU bodies responsible for deciding on the opening and closing of negotiating chapters. Stage 3 must not become a permanent condition of 'second-class members'.

The proposal to introduce qualified majority would prevent decision-making stagnation in the European Union and damages to the Union's power to act, but this proposal requires to reform the Lisbon Treaty – action that would need unanimity (according to article 48 of the TEU). Therefore, it is a very complex solution to put into practice.

As regards access to the European internal market, some analysts stress the mutual benefits that the establishment of new trade relations between the two blocs will produce.²⁷ According to 2022 Eurostat data, the EU27's annual trade surplus with the WB6 in 2021 was equivalent to the Western Balkans Investment Plan of the same year (approximately €8.7 billion).²⁸ Closer economic cooperation could also contribute to covering the gap in terms of economic development, helping the region to reach greater stability.

In terms of internal stability and democratisation, in recent years the Western Balkans have experienced the re-awakening of nationalist rhetoric, which has led to a widespread political polarisation – and the Covid-19 pandemic, as in many other countries, has accelerated this process.²⁹ The 'enlargement fatigue' and the growing disillusionment with the EU are excellent arguments for nationalist leaders who can thus blame the EU for the lack of progress – or in some cases even the regression – in terms of rule of law.

A clearer communication on the steps to be followed, the benchmarks to be met and the sanctions that may be imposed, would also help create a civil society more attentive and involved in policy-making processes, and less prone to extremist and anti-European rhetoric.

Main takeaways from the Friends of the Western Balkans network meeting

On 22-24 June, the network of the Friends of the Western Balkans met in Thessaloniki, Greece, to discuss the new perspectives opened by the staged accession model developed in the last few years.

Two different considerations about the implementation of the staged accession methodology were made in the course of the discussion. On the one hand, it was encouraged the promotion of staged accession, insisting on the need to disburse more funds in the pre-accession phase – especially in the education and health sectors, directly affecting the well-being of citizens – and include candidate countries, as they reach certain benchmarks in key areas, in the work of the Council of Ministers. On the other hand, some participants expressed scepticism about changing the rules of the game now that negotiations have been opened for two of the candidate countries –

Albania and North Macedonia – that risk seeing their efforts wasted. Rather, it has been pointed out that the so-called 'new methodology', introduced by France in 2019 and adopted in 2020, has not so far been implemented because of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, and that, before considering further reform of the enlargement process, the new methodology should be given a serious chance. Moreover, doubts have arisen as to whether a greater injection of money can effectively reduce inequalities between EU member states and the Western Balkan countries – considered the results of inadequate fiscal and economic policy – if not even be harmful in terms of increased corruption.

What has emerged from the debate is that the insistence on the rule of law and the principle of reversibility undoubtedly represents a guarantee for the member states, concerned that further enlargement may open the doors of the EU to new illiberal states. Yet, they do not provide adequate guarantees to the candidate countries, which complain about the lack of a geopolitical strategy and political will of the European Union, whose member states can exercise their veto power to block the accession of newcomers.

Moreover, the main concern is that this sort of grey zone between candidate status and full membership, envisaged by the staged accession, would create new vulnerabilities in the Western Balkans, which are susceptible to influence from countries. It is the case of China, which grants financial assistance without conditionality, or Russia, which leverages cultural ties and old unresolved conflicts to strengthen its own influence. The result of these two forces could be increasing corruption among political elites in the Western Balkans, needing for economic and political support.

Ultimately, the need to involve civil society organisations in the accession process was stressed, as they can help the Commission to monitor the adherence of their own national governments to the commitments made and to evaluate the outcomes of the reforms.

Conclusion

Staged accession can be a valid instrument to make the enlargement process more dynamic and predictable: the consolidation phase allows candidate states to become familiar with the political and decision-making dynamics of the European Union while allowing member states to assess how far reforms, especially those related to the rule of law, are embedded in the political and social systems of candidate states. Bearing in mind that no reform of the accession process can be an antidote to the populism and nationalism that is taking hold in the Western Balkans, especially with regard to upcoming uncertainty factors, such as the elections in North Macedonia in 2024.

The only antidote is to cope with the uncertainty and disillusionment of most Western Balkan countries, which fear that they will be considered 'second-class members', trapped in yet another limbo that does not allow the enjoyment of all the rights of accession. Coping with uncertainty

and disillusionment means providing a clear roadmap and a precise time limit to the entire process – and especially a time limit for the consolidation phase – making the process less evanescent. It also means giving a tangible sign of a real political will to move forwards on both sides – but above all on the part of the European Union.

It is urgent to resolve the bilateral disputes that still hang between member states and Western Balkan countries and to change the old narrative of 'carrot and stick' that accompanied the enlargement process, in order to make the Balkan citizens more aware of what it means to join the European family. And, consequently, it is necessary to establish functioning mechanisms to involve the civilian population in the process.

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EMBRACING THE WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES' EU ACCESSION AT PRESENT

A VITAL QUESTION MARK FOR THE EU

ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the challenges and geopolitical shifts impacting the European Union (EU) enlargement process for the Western Balkan (WB) region. Concerns over democratic institutions and reluctance of some EU member countries have significantly slowed down the enlargement process. To overcome obstacles, the EU has been pushing in the region both the reforms needed but also the idea of reaching regional integration as a way to enhance welfare, growth, and stability. However, these strategies have not yet yielded the desired results.

The outbreak of Covid-19, geopolitical tensions, and an increasingly confrontational global environment might well compel the EU to reassess its regional engagement and provide a credible enlargement path for the WB. Yet, reforms are not only needed in the WB, but also in the EU to make its decision-making process more efficient. Notwithstanding current obstacles, the shifting global order and the influence of external actors in the region make the WB's inclusion within the EU of vital importance for the European security and stability at large.

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MONTENEGRO'S POLITICAL TRANSITION

FROM DJUKANOVIĆ TO WHERE?

ABSTRACT

Since 2020, Montenegro has been marred by strong political turbulence, whose main driver has been the gradual loss of power by long-time former President Milo Đukanović and his party, the Democratic Party of Societies (DPS), which have been in power since the country introduced multipartism in 1991. Đukanović's hold on power guaranteed Montenegro's hold on Western values and Euro-Atlantic institutions, building on a strong Montenegrin national identity and decoupling from Serbia. At the same time, Montenegro became a classic case of 'stabilocracy', with a strong degree of state capture, corruption and political control of media and judiciary. Years of political tensions, due mostly to the attempts by DPS to marginalise the Serb minority in the country and to the strongly felt grievances against the perceived authoritarian rule by Đukanović resulted in the ousting of DPS from power following the parliamentary elections in 2020, when a loose coalition of pro-Serbs and civic forces – whose only common denominator was the removal of the ruling party from power – managed to form a short-lived government. Notwithstanding the ensuing instability, and the persistence of the divide between pro-Serbs forces and the advocates of a strong Montenegrin identity, the presidential elections in March-April 2023 saw the final demise of Đukanović with the election of Jakov Milatović as president. His recently born Europe Now! Movement managed to combine pro-Serbs feelings with calls for economic development, with a populist twist. Parliamentary elections in June of the same year resulted in Europe Now! gaining the most votes, although not enough to form a government alone, with DPS managing to keep a fair share of support. As Montenegro embarks on the difficult process of forming a coalition government, its commitment to Euro-Atlantic values might be put to the test.

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BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA

HOW TO BUILD A VIABLE ROAD TO EU MEMBERSHIP

ABSTRACT

Since its beginning with the Stabilisation and Association Agreement in 2005, Bosnia-Herzegovina's EU path has been marred by the country's unwillingness to gather the necessary political consensus to adopt the reforms needed to improve its functionality, its rule of law and its democratic standard. This feature has proved itself true throughout BiH's EU journey. The limits of conditionality have been overcome by Brussels' and the member states' several decisions to lower the bar and allow Sarajevo to go further. The 2022 decision by the Commission and the Council to grant BH the candidate status stems from almost purely geopolitical considerations, rather than from the effort of Bosnian institutions to reform. The same will most likely be true when, in March 2024, the Commission might recommend the Council for the opening of accession negotiations.

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