



CHALLENGES FOR EU ENLARGEMENT IN A POST-COVID SCENARIO



Summary

Today, stating that the EU enlargement towards the Western Balkan countries is in a stalemate amounts to a cliché. The number of declarations, summits, initiatives and pleas from Brussels and some member states has only reinforced a growing frustration, as deeds have not followed words and the commitment to the region's 'European perspective' remains half-baked – the case of the Bulgarian veto to the opening of North Macedonia's Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) only strengthened such gloomy picture.

This policy brief looks at how to put the process of enlargement back into the European Union's agenda in a post-Covid environment, to prevent a further detachment of the Western Balkan states from the EU, and taking advantage of the new financing opportunities of the period 2021-27. It also look at the role that European progressives should play in order to make European accession a credible prospect for the WB 6.

About the authors:

Maria Francesca Rita

Researcher, CeSPI

with an introduction by

Dario D'Urso

Researcher, CeSPI

In partnership with:

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Challenges for EU enlargement in a post-Covid scenario

Maria Francesca Rita

Researcher, CeSPI

with an introduction by

Dario D'Urso

Researcher, CeSPI

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1. Introduction

Apparently, some EU member states and some Western Balkan countries aspiring for membership have one thing in common: playing a lip service to the values and importance of the enlargement as a way to restore faith in the European project, to advance democracy and rule of law and to counter third countries' influence in the region. Unfortunately, and mostly to the detriment of Western Balkans' citizens, several EU and Western Balkan political elites prefer to keep the process frozen, only to have some of it revived for the occasional summit or declaration.

Even the application of the new enlargement methodology – itself a result of a political drama initiated by the French 'no' to the opening of negotiations for Albania and North Macedonia in 2019 – does not seem to have yielded many results, with the IGCs blocked by Sofia's bilateral dispute with Skopje on elements of shared language, culture and history. While several EU capitals fear an influx of migrants from the Western Balkans, mostly ungroundedly as it is already underway especially towards Germany, Austria, Slovenia, many Western Balkan political elites show only a façade commitment to the deep reforms the EU accession requires, as implementing them could translate in losing their grip on state resources and electoral patronage.

In such context, EU institutions often lack the required political stamina to represent a pushing factor between these two divergent forces, thus resulting in the basically stuck enlargement process we

have been experiencing in the last eight years, since the entry of Croatia.

Today, progressive forces in Europe should invest politically in building resilient constituencies, both in member states and in acceding countries, in order to bring concretely the issue of enlargement back in the EU agenda. Such approach calls for less condescendence for those political leaders in the Western Balkans playing lip service to the reforms needed, especially in the rule of law area, and a more constant political engagement from the member states towards the region, enhancing the opportunities for exchanges with its civil society and creating a narrative more adherent to the reality of a group of countries which is already, inherently, European.

Unblocking the accession process of Albania and North Macedonia should be the first step in such direction, through political facilitation and pressure on Bulgaria. The stalemate on enlargement is already costing dearly to many Western Balkans citizens.

2. Perspectives for 2021-27

2.1 Revised enlargement methodology

In February 2018, the European Commission announced the adoption of a new enlargement strategy through a Communication¹ with the significant title "A credible enlargement perspective for an enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans". However, this move did not have significant effects and the enlargement process kept losing credibility.

¹https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf



In April 2018, the Commission issued an unconditional recommendation to open access negotiations with North Macedonia (for which the first recommendation dates back to 2009) and Albania. The strongest example of the Western Balkan countries commitment in the European path has been the subsequent Prespa agreement, reached in June 2018 between the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Greece that enshrined the renaming of Macedonia in North Macedonia.

Having evaluated the progress made by the two countries, the Council of the European Union expressed the positive opinion to open negotiations in 2019.²

However, the European Council on 17-18 October 2019 decided to revert to the issue of enlargement before the EU-Western Balkans summit in Zagreb in May 2020.³ The decision not to open negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia was mainly due to French opposition. Macron's veto, described by Jean-Claude Juncker as a "historic error", further weakened the credibility of European promises. Macron's justification was twofold: first, the EU needs to strengthen itself before incorporating new members; second, the enlargement process needs to be revised. In his words: "We need a reformed European Union and a reformed enlargement process, a real credibility and a strategic vision of who we are and our role".⁴ Shortly after, in November 2019, France proposed a reform of the accession process in a non-paper.⁵

However, **it should be recognised that the EU consolidation and the enlargement are not two opposite processes.** It can be argued that the two processes are complementary, and that the EU becomes stronger through the WB accession. The EU, and its member states, should admit that it is a matter of continental integrity, and that the European project is incomplete without the inclusion of all the Western Balkans countries.

At a higher level, the risk is at the security dimension: **the distancing between the EU and the WB6 could further increase the power of non-democratic governments and could be all the more reason for third actors to strengthen their presence in the region.** The EU can avoid these risks, but it needs to strongly commit in the Western Balkans. Negotiations need to speed up for Montenegro and Serbia (that opened respectively 33 and 18 chapters, but provisionally closed only 3 and 2 of them),⁶ and need to start as soon as possible for North Macedonia and Albania. Bosnia and Herzegovina, after the improvement of its legislative and institutional framework to ensure the fulfilment of key priorities, should be granted candidate status. Finally, it will be necessary to address the issue of Kosovo.

On 5 February 2020 the European Commission, based on the French proposal, adopted the new methodology for the accession negotiations (COM(2020) 57 final). Recognising the need to improve the accession process and its implementation, **the Commission proposal is aimed at enhancing credibility**

² <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/35863/st10555-en18.pdf>

³ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/41123/17-18-euco-final-conclusions-en.pdf>

⁴ https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_after_the_french_veto_the_new_scramble_for_the_western_balkans/

⁵ <https://www.politico.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Enlargement-nonpaper.pdf>

⁶ Montenegro 2020 Report: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/default/files/montenegro_report_2020.pdf

Serbia 2020 Report: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/default/files/serbia_report_2020.pdf



and trust on both sides. Therefore, the new methodology is based on four principles: credibility, predictability, dynamism and stronger political steer. The European Commission tries to shift from a process that is mostly technical and static to a more political and dynamic approach.

In practical terms, the new methodology foresees the grouping of 33 negotiation chapters into six thematic clusters: fundamentals; internal market; competitiveness and inclusive growth; green agenda and sustainable connectivity; resources, agriculture and cohesion; external relations. As stated in the official communication, “clustering chapters will allow a stronger focus on core sectors in the political dialogue and provide an improved framing for higher level political engagement. It will allow the most important and urgent reforms per sector to be identified. This will give overall reform processes more traction on the ground, by better incentivising sectoral reforms in the interests of citizens and business” (COM(2020) 57 final: 4). The process should be overall accelerated thanks to the opening of each cluster as a whole, rather than on an individual chapter basis.

On 25 March 2020, the Council of the European Union adopted the written procedure regarding the opening of accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania.⁷ The following day, the members of the European Council endorsed the conclusions.

The Zagreb declaration,⁸ released after the EU-Western Balkans summit held on 6 May 2020, reiterates the EU’s unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans countries. At the

same time, many observers have criticised the declaration for generally referring to the “European perspective of the Western Balkans” rather than mentioning more explicitly the membership (CeSPI 2020).

In July 2020 the draft negotiating framework for North Macedonia and Albania was presented to the member states. A date for the first Intergovernmental Conference has not yet been established for either of the two countries. While the case for Albania looks quite straightforward, a new obstacle has appeared for North Macedonia, this time via Bulgaria, who is opposing the opening of the Intergovernmental Conference due to a longstanding spat with Skopje on the definition of ‘Macedonian language’ and on some disputed historical facts between the two countries. Sofia’s stubbornness in not letting North Macedonia go ahead on its European path is sending – again – a wrong message to the rest of the Western Balkans on the values of EU enlargement. If the Bulgarian veto should persist, the option of decoupling the two Intergovernmental Conferences – ie going ahead with the one for Albania – might prevail.

Enlargement towards the Western Balkans has been absent from the European agenda between 2014 and 2018. During those years, the EU did not make any commitment to the region (Anghel, 2019). After gaining momentum in the last couple of years, the risk now is of a new postponement from the agenda. The pandemic crisis has affected every aspect of the EU’s life. Particularly now, during a crisis of such magnitude, **further delaying the enlargement process would mean widening the gap between the EU and the Western Balkans.** While the Covid-19 crisis

⁷ <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7002-2020-INIT/en/pdf>

⁸ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/43776/zagreb-declaration-en-06052020.pdf>



in the WB is deepening the institutional weaknesses of fragile democracies, the European Union should not look the other way right now.

2.2 New financing opportunities for the Western Balkans: the programming period 2021-27

On 6 October 2020 the European Commission adopted the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans. Subject to the adoption of the next Multiannual Financial Framework, the EC proposes the mobilisation of up to 9 billion euro of IPA III funding for the period 2021-27 “to support economic convergence with the EU, primarily through investments and support to competitiveness and inclusive growth, sustainable connectivity, and the twin green and digital transition” (COM(2020) 641 final). The majority of this support should be directed towards sustainable infrastructure development and key productive investments. The document points out the need to be aligned with the European Green Deal, and therefore it is accompanied by a Staff Working Document regarding guidelines for the implementation of a Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (SWD(2020) 223 final). Moreover, the Plan aims to boost the investment capacity of the Western Balkans through a Guarantee Facility.

The Economic and Investment Plan reminds the need to implement fundamental socio-economic reforms in line with the European values: the rule of law, the respect for human rights and the improvement of public administration are

essential benchmarks in the accession path.

After the adoption of the Plan, Olivér Várhelyi, Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, remarked that the future of the region is in the European Union.⁹ **The strategy set out for the accession has three objectives: the revitalisation of the enlargement process; the opening of negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania; and economic convergence.**

Another instrument put in place in 2020 is a €3.3 billion package to address the direct consequences of the health crisis and the post-pandemic recovery in the WB. Funds have been mostly mobilised for supporting small and medium enterprises and public sector investments (through preferential loans by the European Investment Bank).¹⁰

The most recent update with regard to the IPA III Multi-country Indicative Strategy Paper is the political agreement reached on 2 June 2021 between the European Parliament and the Council on the new Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance, with a budget of over €14 billion for the 2021-27 Multiannual Financial Framework. The adoption of the instrument is expected in the autumn.¹¹ The European Commission reiterated in the proposal the strong connection between the programme and the alignment to European values, as strengthening “the rule of law, democracy, the respect of human rights, fundamental rights and international law, civil society and security as well as improve migration management including border management” (COM(2018) 465 final: 18) are listed as its first specific objectives.

⁹ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2019-2024/varhelyi/announcements/boosting-and-connecting-western-balkans-eu-path_en

¹⁰ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/economic-support-to-western-balkans/>

¹¹ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_2810



IPA III will be complementary to the new Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) – “Global Europe”. With a budget of €79.5 billion, the instrument will cover the EU cooperation with all third countries, contributing to the overcome of developmental challenges and to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.¹²

Although the instruments described above show the European interest and commitment in the region, the enlargement process continues to seem too slow and the access of Western Balkans countries to the EU keeps being relegated to an undefined future. “The Western Balkans region needs a credible reinforcement of its European path to break out of the mutually linked cycle of enlargement and accession fatigue and diminish the relative attractiveness of alternative paths propagated by non-EU players” (Rant, Mrak, Marinč, 2020: 444). A possible solution outlined by Rant, Mrak and Marinč (2020) is a strong statement on the EU side that the membership will be a successful engine for economic development and social cohesion. Post-accession benefits for the Western Balkans, much greater than pre-accession ones, will help speed up the convergence process. This prospect might be a way to ease the scepticism towards the EU and to encourage the adoption of reforms.

3. The EU, the Western Balkans and the pandemic: challenges and opportunities

3.1 Covid-19 and fundamental rights

Covid-19 has affected freedom and civil liberties all over the world. A vast majority of governments have introduced restrictions to the freedom of movement and of assembly, but also curfews and declarations of the state of emergency. All these measures, on the one side necessary to contain the spread of the virus, on the other side have had an impact on the safeguarding of democracy, especially in those countries where fundamental rights and the rule of law were already undermined. In this framework, the EU is forced to confront itself with regard to fundamental rights and the rule of law, both within its members and with regard to enlargement countries. According to many observers, a heightened crisis of democracy in the Western Balkan countries is a serious danger (Bieber et al., 2020).

In the period April-July 2020, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung published a series of reports (Brändle et al., 2020a; Brändle et al., 2020b; Brändle et al., 2020c; Brändle et al., 2020d) about the relation between democracy and the state of emergency in the Western Balkans. In the first report, the tendency to concentrate power in the hands of the executive, weakening the legislative branches, is outlined. Moreover, the opposition parties have also been increasingly delegitimised. Civil society is more and more important to keep an eye on the governments.

The pandemic has exacerbated the weaknesses of some political systems and personalisation of power. However, it was

¹² https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_1267



immediately clear that all governments of the region were approaching the pandemic in different ways, reflecting the level of strength (or weakness) of democracy: “the coronavirus crisis is in a way a mirror held up to each country” (Brändle et al., 2020c: 2).

According to the European Council on Foreign Relations (Ruge, 2020), **the traditional European strife between the intention to support external countries and the need to ensure human rights and the rule of law are protected could be resolved by continuing to send aid, but not to corrupt governments.** European funds should be directly addressed to the sectors in need, in this case the healthcare sector. The inclusion of the region in the EU assistance and recovery is essential, but according to some authors “the support should be conditioned on measures to reduce the state capture” (Bieber et al., 2020: 2).

3.2 Covid-diplomacy

Since the beginning of the health emergency, Western Balkan governments have constantly expressed disappointment with respect to the EU attitude towards the region. The restriction on the export of medical protective equipment established by the European Commission on 14 March 2020 with the Implementing Regulation 2020/402,¹³ which made the export of such products subject to an authorisation, was the counterpoint of the increasing presence of third actors in the region. China immediately started to use the pandemic as a lever to strengthen its

presence in the Balkans, along with Russia and Turkey.

During the first months, dissatisfaction and anger were the most expressed feelings among the enlargement countries towards the EU. To its extreme, it culminated in Vučić’s definition at a press conference of the EU solidarity as a fairy tale in contrast to Chinese brotherhood (Brändle et al., 2020a).

Turkey started immediately to provide assistance through the shipment of medical equipment to the Western Balkans. This ‘Covid-diplomacy’ has produced reactions among Turkish citizens because the government was engaged more abroad than inside the country to counter the pandemic (Talbot, 2020; Cicciù, 2020). One year later, the same propensity is seen in Russia with vaccines: although the share of the vaccinated population is very low (on May 25th only 10.81% of Russian population received at least one dose, in comparison with the EU which stood at 35.66%),¹⁴ Russia is selling a huge amount of vaccines abroad.

It could be argued that the diplomatic strategy put in place by Russia, Turkey and China is more effective than the EU line. At the propaganda level (for some Western Balkan governments) and at the communication level (on the EU institutions side) it can be said that the EU has come out of the first months defeated.

Although the EU actually sent to the region medical aid in the first phase, and then vaccines in 2021, the initial hesitation has been exploited by some of the Balkan countries to show that the alliance with other great powers (China in the lead) was stronger than the European

¹³The Implementing Regulation, in force until April 26th 2020, is available at:

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32020R0402&from=G>

¹⁴[A](https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations)

<https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations>



friendship. Serbia's Covid-diplomacy is clear: through pro-government media, Vučić wants to show and celebrate the support received by China and to diminish the one coming from the EU.

However, the EU started to regain popularity with the announcement of the above-mentioned significant financial help at the end of April 2020. The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, highlighted that the EU will continue to support the region, beyond the assistance in the pandemic, to adopt all the reforms needed on the EU path.¹⁵

The assistance allocated by the EU is far higher than the one coming from China or Russia. In addition to this, the agreements with Russia and China for the purchase of vaccines are not transparent; for example, the price set for the purchase of vaccines is frequently unknown. However, the public opinion has a different perception due to the propaganda promoted by pro-government media outlets.

The EU should improve its communication and visibility in the region; at the same time, its actions towards the region might be too weak to counter the narrative put in place by other actors.

The Covid-19 challenge can become a great opportunity for improving cooperation between WB6 and the EU. On 28 December 2020, Enlargement Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi announced the adoption of a €70 million aid package for facilitating the access of Western Balkans to vaccines, remarking the fact that the WB6 are privileged partners of the EU.¹⁶ WB6 countries were called upon to rely on the COVAX mechanism, an initiative to ensure vaccines are available for every

country in the world with the aim to distribute 2 billion doses by the end of 2021. The EU is the fourth contributor to the COVAX mechanism.¹⁷ However, the initiative led to protests in many countries for the delay in the delivery of vaccines. If WB6 will rely only or predominantly on this initiative, they will seriously remain behind the rest of Europe.

Montenegro, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, who rely the most on the COVAX system, are in the worst situation with regard to the vaccine supply and are now receiving donations of vaccines from their neighbour Serbia, which secured other supply lines (approximately 3.5 million doses from China – according to CeSPI and OBCT 2021 – including the vaccines already received and the ones that will arrive).

At this moment, it is fundamental to improve cooperation between the EU and the WB6. The pandemic needs a coordinated response, and the EU needs to secure a preferential channel for the WB6 in the vaccine supply.

Linking the issue of Covid-diplomacy with the enlargement perspective, the enhancement of the WB6 relations with third actors could be another step in the distancing of the region from the EU. China and Russia have adopted a strategy at odds with the EU strategy, deciding not to secure the coverage of their population at first, but to use vaccines for the enhancement of foreign relations. The distribution of Chinese vaccines in countries close to the EU is probably a way to show these vaccines are safe, and therefore it is a way for the further expansion of Chinese influence in Europe.

¹⁵ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_777

¹⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/it/IP_20_2539

¹⁷ <https://www.statista.com/chart/24244/donations-to-covax-by-country/>



At the end of March 2021, President von der Leyen announced the delivery of 650,000 Pfizer vaccine doses to the Western Balkans. This shows the difference between the actors involved in the region. The 'late' response of the EU could be seen as a decision focused primarily on safeguarding its citizens, in contrast to Chinese or Russian foreign policy, placed above citizens' interests.

In conclusion, the European policy towards the region should be fostered as much as

possible among Western Balkans citizens. The EU is the only actor in the region that showed and will continue to show an engagement that goes beyond strategic interest, and its delays in the response to the pandemic should not be read as a break in the common path. However, in order for the post-Covid recovery to represent an opportunity for a further approximation, there is the need to address some critical challenges.

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NEED TO TAKE ACTION
Next steps for progressives' commitment in the Western Balkans



Summary

What should progressive forces do to finally overcome the deadlock that characterises European enlargement debates and ensure a credible political turn? What are their responsibilities? These topics were at the centre of the debate 'What is progressive? The EU and the challenge of enlargement to the Western Balkans' that took place on 18 June 2021. Discussion pointed out how strategic alliances among progressives and enhanced civil society participation to the enlargement process are key elements that should be strengthened in order to push enlargement policies from technocratic to politics.

About the authors:


Maria Francesca Rita
Research Fellow

In partnership with:



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April 2021

DEALING WITH EU ACCESSION IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY
From halfway commitments to overlapping agendas



Summary

The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic has put to test EU's cohesion and effectiveness not only with regards to its internal governance, but also in relation to its strategic partnerships with neighbouring countries, starting from the enlargement countries in the Western Balkans.

While a series of multiple crises in the EU were already contributing to cement resistance towards the enlargement agenda, the pandemic seems to have exacerbated pre-existing problems related to this policy, which is today crumbling under the pressure of current emergencies.

Indeed, the process of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans is today framed by ambiguities, not providing a clear path towards EU membership. To navigate through these cloudy and gloomy days, EU-Western Balkan relations should move from halfway commitments, toward a common agenda of tackling the root issues of the current situation, namely the ensuing socio-economic distress and political backsliding in the Western Balkans.

About the author:

Matteo Bonomi
Research Fellow
Institute Affair International (IAI)

About the project:

This Policy Brief is produced in the framework of the project 'What is Progressive? The EU and the challenge of enlargement to the Western Balkans'. Copyright © 2021 by the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS), the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), and the Fondation Jean Jaurès (FJJ).

EU enlargement to the Western Balkans

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April 2021

From EU Enlargement Fatigue to Ambiguity
By Matteo Bonomi