

Policy Paper

WESTERN BALKANS AT THE CROSSROADS: WHICH ROAD SHOULD THE EU TAKE?

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Summary

The Western Balkans represent one of the last regions of Europe not yet integrated into the European Union nor, except Albania and Montenegro, into NATO. However, given the region's geographic proximity and strategic positioning, its stability and prosperity are crucial for the security of the entire Euro-Atlantic space. With EU officials becoming alarmed by growing Russian or Chinese interests in the region, democratic backsliding and rising social and ethnic tensions in the Balkans, the enlargement agenda has recently been revisited. That the EU door is open for the Western Balkans was confirmed in EU Commission President Juncker's 2017 State of the Union Address and spelled out in the Commission's strategy for 'A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans' in February 2018. Yet, with almost two years passing since Juncker's speech, we can assume that the return of EU's attention to the region has been rather hesitant and has brought little tangible results and mixed feelings so far.

To enhance EU's credibility and support to the Western Balkan countries' efforts to carry out the necessary reforms

and to limit non-Western actors' field for further action, **this paper suggests several recommendations for new Commission's and European External Action Service's (EEAS) strategy towards the region** based on research done within the PSSI-led project, 'Western Balkans at the Crossroads: Assessing Non-Democratic Actors Influences.'

The EU should **openly communicate its perspective on the prospective enlargement of the Western Balkans with local representatives, as well as its Member States**. It should **make communication a priority in its strategy towards the region, and invest in self-promotion to improve its visibility**, instead of relying only on its 'natural' attractiveness. It should **support research, independent journalism and awareness-raising initiatives on external influence activities and their causes and consequences** both through funding mechanisms and capacities building. It should also **engage actors in civil society, encourage the cultivation of a democratic environment to hold local leaders more accountable** and limit their ability to exploit relations with non-Western countries for personal gains and power consolidation.

Background Context

The Western Balkans are closely linked with the EU and the stability of the region is therefore considered to be in the EU's own political, security, and economic interests and as a matter of "geostrategic investment."¹ However, the past years have shown that this investment has been either insufficient or not adequately targeted. The EU's dominant position has recently been undermined by the slow progress in the Western Balkans integration into its structures. The still distant prospect of EU membership is caused, among other issues, by the so-called 'EU enlargement fatigue' following Croatia's accession, or insufficient efforts to proceed with the necessary reforms on the side of Western Balkan governments. Furthermore, when analyzing EU-Western Balkan relations, we cannot overlook that they do not take place in a geopolitical vacuum, but are influenced by engaging with other external actors, and shifts in the global scene.

For centuries, the Balkans have been a site of great-power rivalry, laying at a crossroads of varied foreign actor's interests and strategic goals. In the changing global context marked by troubled Western relations with Russia, the mistrust of a newly-authoritarian Turkey, unbridled Chinese economic expansion, and the growing presence of the Gulf States, all of whom are in some way drawn to the Western Balkans' position as a gateway to Europe, the region has once again become an attractive playing field in the global geopolitical game.

Russia, Turkey, China, and the Gulf States have increased their influence in the region, and have attempted to challenge the pro-Western orientation of the Western Balkans with a variety of tools to exert economic, political, cultural, and religious leverage. The scope and nature of their engagement differs significantly; their interests are often conflicting, and their true influence exaggerated. Yet, despite the fact that none of these actors provides a real alternative to the "European path" for the Western Balkans, their image among the local population is often very positive, and influence largely inflated. While the EU is the largest development aid donor, and the single largest investor and trade partner of the Western Balkan countries (with an average share of around 75% of their total foreign trade and FDI), many people across the Balkans believe Russia or Turkey to be their primary economic partners and see them (the Slavic Orthodox population for Russia, while the Muslims gravitate more toward Turkey) as traditional protectors based on cultural and religious affinities. Chinese infrastructural projects and loans entering the region in the

past years are often seen as a welcome contribution to balancing Western hegemony. Opinion polls also show that a significant segment of the population, mainly in Serbia and BiH's Republika Srpska, is generally anti-Western oriented.

Since regional and global tensions feed into each other, and non-Western actors do not shy away from skillfully exploiting local vulnerabilities, many of their activities have the potential to slow down Euro-Atlantic integration or jeopardize the stability of the region. The West is beginning to realize that, to limit non-Western actors' field of action, the West needs to take a more proactive approach, with more tangible and clearly-presented incentives for the countries of the region.

But, despite the EU's returned attention to the region, openly manifested and formulated in the February 2018 European Commission's strategy for "A Credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans," the past year's development was far from clearly showing the EU's commitment and unity in its approach toward the region. Summits held during the summer in 2018, the Commission's May 2019 reports on progress, and the Council's June 2019 decision, especially with regards to still delaying the opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, created disillusionment among pro-European actors in the Balkans. Frustration is also growing over the EU's support to Balkan "stabilocrats:" the overlooking of some local leaders' increasing grip on power and buckling down on civil liberties or media freedom, and thus favouring stability over the enforcement of the democratic values the EU claims to stand for.

The stress on local governments' responsibility for the successful progress of the integration process is also pronounced in the Commission's strategy where little attention is devoted to civil society actors and citizens. Furthermore, despite being motivated by fears of the increasing influence of Russia, China, the Gulf, or Turkey in the region, the strategy and other EU documents are formulated as if the mutual relations took place in a geopolitical vacuum. Disregarding how other actors shape the field is short-sighted, since to a large extent, their activities can limit the EU's presence in the region and a better understanding of them thus has the potential to reveal where the EU policies' weaknesses are.

1 "A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans," https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf.

Three possible courses of future development

1) The Western Balkan countries and the EU are committed to the EU perspective of the region, and the integration process proceeds with real and credible membership prospects for all countries. Potential harmful impacts of other external actors' involvement are significantly limited.

- The Western Balkan countries intensify their efforts in carrying out the necessary reforms in line with EU requirements, and achieve harmony with EU laws, norms, and values, including strengthening the rule of law, economy, and civil rights and freedoms, tackling corruption and organised crime, reaching good neighbourly relations and reconciliation.
- The EU reaches a consensus on the EU-Western Balkans enlargement desirability, speed, and process, and commits itself to the enlargement agenda. It allows the Western Balkan states to access its cohesion and structural funds, invites their representatives to various ministerial meetings and councils, and prepares for the reception of new members. Negotiation talks with North Macedonia and Albania are opened until 2020, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo (conditioned on making a settlement with Serbia) have the outlook of receiving candidate status, and opening negotiation talks in the future, membership prospects are real for Montenegro and Serbia in ten-years-time.

2) The European integration of the Western Balkans continues at the current pace and is met with limited success, but progress is often stalled or relapses, while other actors gain increasing influence in the region.

- The Western Balkan countries' representatives are negligent in carrying out the necessary reforms, instead prioritising the consolidation of their own power. There is slow progress in certain areas, but few tangible results. Distant membership prospects undermine the Western Balkan countries' motivation to tackle long-standing problems, such as the poor rule of law, corruption, nationalism, or problematic bilateral relations. Public support for EU membership is declining, and other external actors are gaining visibility and being portrayed and understood as important partners.

- The EU declaratively supports the Western Balkans enlargement agenda, but lacks internal consensus on the issue, and its commitment to the region is therefore hesitant. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo have not been granted a candidate status, negotiation talks with North Macedonia and Albania are opened much later than expected, and the prospect of Serbia and Montenegro joining the EU is still postponed.

3) The Western Balkans' European path is not called off but effectively stalled, the EU's dominant position is significantly challenged by Russia's, China's or Turkey's rising foothold in the region.

- With the EU integration process practically halted, the situation in the Western Balkans is deteriorating; nationalism and ethnic tensions are rising, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia face the threat of internal destabilisation, their territorial integrity and democratic legitimacy is challenged, democratic standards, including freedom of speech and respect for human rights, are further eroded, and corruption and nepotism are rising. Russia, China, and Turkey gain an increasing foothold in the region with the EU losing its dominant position.
- The EU Member States are divided over the question of the Western Balkans enlargement agenda, with some states effectively blocking the process. Without membership prospects, the integration process loses its rationale and is effectively stalled despite not being officially called off.

While the third option cannot be excluded for being unrealistic, there is a wide consensus on its undesirability among experts. Which of the first two scenarios will prevail is, however, a matter of current debates at the EU level. Today, the situation is closest to the second scenario, but the Commission's strategy for 'A Credible enlargement perspective' calls for the first option to be put on the table. To achieve the first scenario—enhance EU's credibility and Western Balkan countries' commitment to the EU integration process and limit non-Western actors' field for further action—this paper suggests several recommendations for new Commission's and EEAS's strategy towards the region, drawing on findings of the PSSI-led project 'Western Balkans at the Crossroads: Assessing Non-Democratic Actors Influences.'

Recommendations for the new European Commission and the EEAS to enhance the EU's standing in the Western Balkans and limit other external actors' field of action

1) Open communication about enlargement and self-promotion for improving the EU's visibility should become cornerstones of the EU strategy towards the region.

When not delivering on promises, such as in the case of delaying the opening of the accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, despite both countries meeting the given criteria, the image and credibility of the EU significantly suffers, which is detrimental to the motivation for reform, especially with regards to the EU's stipulated merit-based approach. The EU should, therefore, be open and truthful in its promises, and frank about the real prospects for enlargement. It is necessary that a dialogue is conducted with the Member States, as well as the Western Balkan countries, on what the Western Balkans enlargement might bring to the EU and which challenges it will pose. Finding a consensus among the EU Member States is crucial for making the EU's promises feasible and credible.

Also, the EU should not rely on its 'natural' soft power and attractiveness, taking its position for granted. Instead, it should actively engage in its self-promotion, and make communication a priority of its strategy. As apparent from Russia's, Turkey's, or China's rising popularity and inflated depictions of their involvement, the fact that EU is the largest donor, investor, and trade partner is not enough for winning hearts and minds in the current PR-driven world. The EU enlargement also tends to be understood as an elite-driven project, which further downgrades its popularity among citizens. The new Commission and the EEAS should, therefore, focus on better communicating what the EU does in the Western Balkans, how it improves people's lives, and what more it can bring to them. The EU communication strategy should particularly focus on those areas and people in the Balkans who currently feel alienated from, and unwanted by, the EU, Bosnian and Kosovo Serbs in particular. It should monitor the rise of nationalism and xenophobia, and external actors' role in inciting it (particularly Russia's), while being very sensitive in countering it, and careful not to adopt one group's rhetoric and views, thus solidifying feelings of unfairness among the rest.

2) The EU should support research, independent journalism, and awareness-raising initiatives on external influence activities, their causes, and consequences

Without a deeper understanding of the various modalities of foreign actors meddling and the influence attempts employed, as well as the underlying goals, causes, and consequences, the West can expect only limited results in the deeper integration of the region into its structures. Better comprehension will contribute not only to the prevention of potentially harmful external influences, but also reveal the weaknesses of the current European policies in the region. The EU should, therefore, support research, independent journalism, and awareness-raising initiatives about these topics through its grant schemes. It should also encourage networking and knowledge, and good practice exchanges between various organisations and institutes in the EU Member States and the Western Balkans. It is in the EU's best interest to enhance Western Balkan societies' resilience against external influences undermining democracy and the rule of law, or contributing to the flourishing of a corrupt environment. Increasing understanding and opening a public debate about external actors' influence activities is the first necessary step to make. Supporting and assisting local governments in developing investment screening mechanisms and systems to counter disinformation, or corruption shall follow.

3) The EU should engage civil society actors, encourage the cultivation of a democratic environment and democratic discussion holding local leaders more accountable.

A strong civil society is a prerequisite for a stable and durable democracy, and the EU should not ignore it in its approach and policies towards the region; this perspective is largely lacking in the existing strategy. The strategy introduced by the Juncker Commission stresses the responsibility of local governments for progress toward the European path and leave it up to an internal decision as to what their countries' geostrategic goals are. Our research has, however, shown that many Balkan leaders are keen to exploit their business and political relations with non-Western countries to enjoy the benefits of shady business deals or to consolidate their own power. In Serbia,

government-linked media outlets stand behind the promotion of a positive image of non-Western countries, while often blaming the EU for all failings. In this context, the current EU's approach makes citizens the victims of their leaders' decisions and actions, instead of building a strong civil society, which can be the safeguard of democracy and a motor for reforms. Without popular support for EU integration and leaders held accountable to their citizens, EU enlargement will be either unsuccessful or detrimental for the EU itself if materialised. We, therefore, suggest that the EU's strategy reflects the need to support local civil society actors through its funding schemes, and by inviting them to negotiations on accession chapters, and monitoring and assessment of ongoing developments. It should also establish a platform for regular consultations with civil society representatives.