

COMMENTARY

EU enlargement to the Western Balkans – Three observations



EU ENLARGEMENT ([HTTPS://WWW.EPC.EU/EN/SEARCH?TAG=471](https://www.epc.eu/en/search?tag=471)) / COMMENTARY

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With no real progress in EU enlargement to the Western Balkans, or effective solutions to deal with the region's fundamental problems, the Union's promises of support and a shared future are starting to ring hollow. It is unclear where enlargement policy goes from here.

Last month, the European Commission adopted its [2021 enlargement package](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/news/2021-enlargement-package-european-commission-assesses-and-sets-out-reform-priorities-western_en) (https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/news/2021-enlargement-package-european-commission-assesses-and-sets-out-reform-priorities-western_en), including a new Communication on enlargement, ~~ex~~ evaluation reports for all Western Balkan candidate and potential candidate countries (as well as for Turkey), and reform priorities. This website guides the EU through its in the period ahead. Reading through the package, three observations stand out:

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1. The tone is familiar and, as ever, supportive of the region's European perspective – but sounds off-key with the current reality.

Faithful to its style, the Commission weaves praise and criticism in detailed technocratic language, makes recommendations, and wraps it all up in the well-known discourse about the strategic importance of enlargement for peace, stability, security, and economic growth in Europe. So far, so predictable. Yet, this year it is precisely this consistency that is disturbing, because it does not chime with broader developments.

This enlargement package comes on the heels of the Brdo Summit (6 October 2021), in Slovenia, where EU leaders struggled to agree on giving Western Balkan countries guarantees of future membership and haggled over the mention of the word "enlargement" (<https://www.politico.eu/newsletter/brussels-playbook/western-balkans-pipe-dreams-no-decisions-on-strategic-autonomy-covid-pass-troubles-in-strasbourg/>). The habitual – albeit vague – talk of the region's "European perspective" and one reference to the "e"-word did make it into the final declaration (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/10/06/brdo-declaration-6-october-2021/>), but on the explicit condition that the Union can "ensure its own development and capacity to integrate members." That EU leaders would get stuck on semantics marks a new low for a policy which is otherwise described as "credible" and "strategic". But it comes as little surprise.

The unequivocal support offered in 2003 by the member states to enlargement towards the Western Balkans has been fizzling out. With France and the Netherlands halting enlargement two years ago and Bulgaria blocking it now, the influence of domestic politics in the member states (<https://www.epc.eu/en/Publications/EU-member-states-and-enlargeme~254ae0>) at key moments over outcomes in the dossier has increased over the past decades – and with it, the risk that EU capitals could wreck the whole process.

The Commission's political endorsements for the region matter, of course. But what purpose do they serve if EU capitals don't make good on their promises? How reassuring and motivating can a positive message continue to be if it is not backed up by action? How long before their words begins to sound indefensibly hypocritical?

The new political crisis brewing in North Macedonia (<https://biepag.eu/blog/what-just-happened-in-north-macedonia-2021-municipal-elections-and-their-aftermath/>) after the recent resignation of the Prime Minister Zoran Zaev and in the aftermath of the resounding victory scored by the conservative opposition in the October 2021 local elections exposes the inherent risks of the EU's lukewarm commitment to the process.

Getting on with the official launch of accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania, which have fulfilled the conditions set by the Commission, would be an essential next step for the EU to save face. But to prove that it really means its lofty

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words on enlargement, keeping promises should become a habit for the member states.

2. The big issues only seem to get bigger, and effective solutions are missing.

Since 2004, the Commission has almost continuously tweaked and refined its enlargement strategy to help the Balkan countries strengthen their democratic systems and economies. But despite the primacy of these fundamental areas of reform in the Commission's methodology, results are still underwhelming. This year's country reports again call attention to persistent and serious problems with the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary, media freedom, and the fight against organised crime and corruption throughout the region, including in front-runners Montenegro and Serbia. It continues to be difficult to meet and sustain democratic standards in the Western Balkans.

But enlargement policy doesn't only struggle to transform the countries of the region into consolidated democracies. Sobering economic prospects, widespread poverty and inequality, and a lack of opportunities reveal some of the other important ways in which the Western Balkans are diverging from the Union and its member states. The COVID-19 pandemic has made matters worse (<https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/eca/publication/western-balkans-regular-economic-report>), exacerbating the region's socio-economic challenges. The same goes for sticky issues like the stalled normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Prishtina, or the impasse in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where, again, the EU does not have ready-made or effective solutions.

In time, the Commission has mastered the art of turning political issues into technical benchmarks, and so far, this has worked to keep the process rolling. But its box of tools and tricks has limits when it comes to democracy- and nation-building or reconciliation in war-torn, multi-ethnic societies, statehood and bilateral disputes, and even the creation of functioning market economies. The more these thorny issues rise in importance and start conditioning progress in the overall enlargement process, the more the shortage of answers becomes obvious.

Clearly, reform is not just a matter of EU prescription. It also relies on political will and implementation in the Western Balkans – which are both still missing in most countries. How to engage with autocratically-minded leaders in the region, who have little interest in promoting good governance and good neighbourly relations, is a real dilemma. But the EU's haphazard commitment to enlargement and its rigorous conditionality, which often bend to the whims of domestic politics in its member states, are unlikely to help deliver convergence. Instead, they push Western Balkan countries to look for pragmatic alternatives in regional coalitions and with other powers.

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suffice to complete the European Union without strong political resolve, an unshakable vision of a joint future and a lot more generous support from the EU. Is it perhaps time for the member states to get off the fence and pick a side, whichever it is?

3. The EU's perception and treatment of the Western Balkans reflects a polarising dichotomy between 'us' and 'them', which is at odds with the avowed intention to build a common European future.

Rhetorically, the EU recognises that it shares the same continent, history, interests, and values with the Western Balkans (https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/news/remarks-commissioner-varhelyi-afet-present-2021-enlargement-package-2021-10-19_en), and that the region can strengthen the Union's role in the world (<https://newsroom.consilium.europa.eu/events/20211006-eu-western-balkans-summit/131810-depart-et-declaration-macron-fr-20211006>). However, it still refers to and treats these countries as outsiders, for example, when it decides to leave them out of the ongoing Conference on the Future of Europe (<https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/Is-the-EU-still-serious-about-the-Balkans~379678>). It also critically assesses them on the basis of their sensitive differences with the Union, most of which are then exploited by political entrepreneurs in the member states to foster popular anxiety and distrust about the region and enlargement. 'Our' common ground, common interest, and common destiny are then overshadowed by prejudice about the risk posed to the Union by 'their' problems.

There is no doubt that the Western Balkans still have to catch up with the EU in many areas. In some respects, the member states themselves are hardly shining examples. The issue is not whether the EU should identify and support the region in overcoming shortcomings – it should absolutely do so. But it should be mindful of the fact that nothing brings a group together like focusing on how bad the other side is doing.

The human mind is exquisitely tuned to group affiliation and group difference because evolution taught us that we need groups to survive.[1] Once others have been classified as 'them' – and it can take the lightest cues – the automatic response is to perceive the out-group as competitors and treat them with scepticism, even hostility, without needing any good reasons to do so. What's more, this separation can lead in-group members to prefer outcomes that are worse off for everyone so long as they maximise the perceived advantages of their group over the others.

Has the EU's focus on 'their' problems eased the fulfilment of membership criteria in the Western Balkans or helped the Union deal with its own similar challenges? Have the past breaks and delays in the process made everyone better off? If the answer is no, then, for this change, ~~we~~ ~~the~~ ~~EU~~ ~~should~~ ~~try~~ ~~to~~ ~~use~~ ~~a~~ ~~new~~ ~~approach~~ ~~that~~ ~~to~~ ~~create~~ ~~polarisation~~ ~~and~~ ~~find~~ ~~new~~ ~~ways~~ ~~to~~ ~~deal~~ ~~with~~ ~~the~~ ~~region~~ ~~as~~ ~~'us'~~. Maybe then the Western Balkans will be more motivated to reform, just as they will meet with a more positive reception in

member state capitals.

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[1] Klein, Ezra (2020), Why we're polarized, London: Profile Books.

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