



**A Unified Family: The Western Balkans towards EU  
membership.  
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## Introduction

While the Western Balkan region has been shaped by instability, war, and nationalism in the last century, the last two decades have been a time of development and advancement. With the current COVID-19 crisis at hand, the concept of a united Europe has been resurrected. This mindset offers new possibilities for the accession process of the Western Balkans into the EU to progress and enlargement of the EU to continue.

While this is a positive development, corruption, a lack of democratic mechanisms and compliance with the *acquis* have been persistent obstacles in the accession process of the region. Therefore, pro-active stances from the EU member states are necessary to foster a successful enlargement process in the region.

While the 2004 enlargement created the so-called *Enlargement fatigue*, the EU is still committed to the Western Balkans and membership is still on the table as it is seen as the opportunity of unity and security. However, although the EU has been committed to the region for a long time, progress has been limited.

Since the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003, the focus has been excessive on the obstacles of the Western Balkan countries to join the EU, while less effort has been devoted to outlining the benefits of EU membership. Thus, a solution-based action-plan is necessary from the EU. This demands clear targets, Key Performance Indicators, and measurable goals needed to define a practical roadmap to the Western Balkan countries.

Though still officially waiting for EU accession, the Western Balkan countries are increasingly in a state of enlargement fatigue. This could create the risk of losing the Western Balkans' willingness to join the EU.

Recently, the positive turn of events in North Macedonia can be used as a stimulus to foster the Western Balkan enlargement process. The new reversed methodology proposed by the European Commission, although with constructive new changes, lacks concrete measures for a future outlook.

As part of the *Student Forum Maastricht 2021*, the working group “A United Family: the Western Balkans towards membership” developed a list of four concrete policy recommendations. These focus on the issues: democracy, economic competitiveness, bilateral issues, diplomatic mediation, and the EU-Western Balkans relations.

## **Policy Option 1: Democracy Promotion as a EU’s priority**

### **Issue**

In light of the numerous issues regarding the rule of law, human rights and freedom of press in some EU member states, the EU must not be hasty about the enlargement process. Nowadays, when the model of liberal democracy is challenged, the European Commission should increase its efforts to ensure that the democratic criteria in candidate countries are met and a threat of further democratic decline is averted.

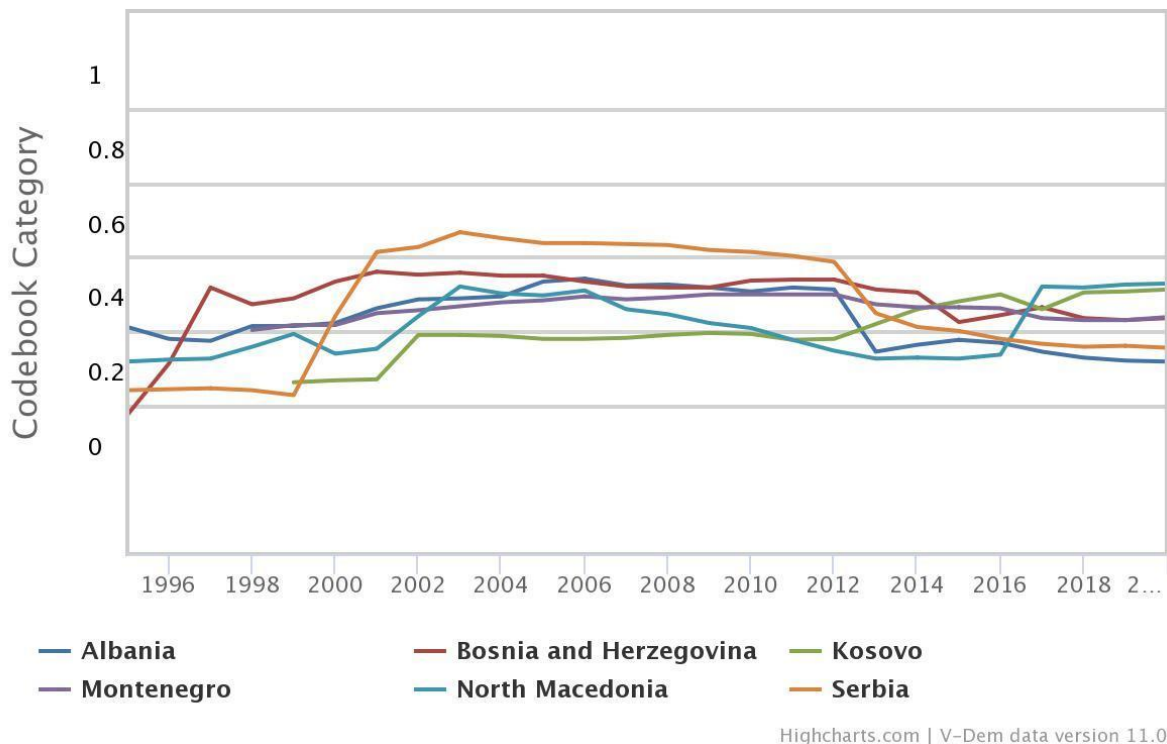
The chart below examines the functioning of democracy in each candidate or potential candidate country of the Western Balkans. In the last few years, the level has either decreased or stagnated. The situation in Serbia is the most concerning since there has been a downward trend since 2004. Only North Macedonia stands out among the Western Balkan countries and

improved

its

score.

## Deliberative Democracy Index



Another issue that needs to be improved is insufficient rhetoric from the EU. While expressing concerns about the democratic backsliding in some Western Balkan states is a good starting point, tangible solutions to initiate reforms are necessary. For the sake of fulfilling the requirements to continue with the negotiations, a solution is here presented.

### **Solution: Early Monitoring System**

It is suggested to establish an e Early Monitoring System. The latter would ensure the control of how the candidate countries comply with EU conditionality.

In particular, the Early Monitoring System implies the creation of a specific platform within the EU that would be exclusively responsible for the observation of the process of democratic development in each candidate country. It is believed that such a platform is needed as it does not only tackle the progress but also the shortcomings during the process of democratic development. On the one hand, this platform would warn the EU about the shortcomings in the process immediately and respond to them at an early stage when the crackdown on the problems

is still largely possible and at a lower cost. On the other hand, to help candidate countries be more vigilant and prevent any serious deviation from the democratic development. Moreover, in order to ensure the effective performance of the Early Monitoring System, it is essential that the EU mobilises additional human and financial resources. In other words, an additional team of experts who would work on the observation process will be needed.

The Early Monitoring System has advantages as well as disadvantages. The advantages of the system are its capacity to inform the EU at an early stage regarding any shortcoming in the process and facilitates the problem solution for the institution. Furthermore, the system assists the candidate countries to prevent any severe disruption in democratic development. Moreover, the robust observation on each step of the candidate countries democratic development keeps them motivated, mobilised and focused on the development that is the precondition for their successful accession to the EU. As for the disadvantages, it is worth mentioning that the platform might be perceived by the candidate countries as the mechanism that ensures the EU's deep involvement in their domestic affairs and restricts in certain ways their free performance in terms of democratic development. However, this approach might nurture the public opinion in the candidate countries about the imperative character of the EU and reinforce the view that EU membership restricts the independence of the countries.

## **Policy Option 2: Economic competitiveness and moving from oligarchy**

### **Issue**

The impossibility of the Western Balkan counties to take part of the common market enhanced the chances of implementing protectionist policies, in some cases devolving on complete state oligarchy. Corrupt oligarchies hinder not only a fair and fully functional market but demonstrate a clear obstacle to joining the EU. In this obstacle, there is present an urgent risk, that these highly protective economies are paradoxically more vulnerable to big competitors than those that are open. Many of the industries of these countries have begun to be dominated by Russia and China in particular. Corruption and the current state of the economy make particularly hard for small domestic businesses to develop and grow. Therefore, the EU shall step in and assist

them. In order to make the Western Balkans a competitive economic region, the EU is ought to introduce the following policy proposals.

## **Solutions**

### **Solution 1: Green initiatives and digitalisation**

The European Commission shall invest in Green initiatives and Digitalisation in the Western Balkan region. This means fostering renewable energy projects, such as solar energy. In the rural areas, the European Commission shall enhance environment-friendly measures campaign, while supporting digital initiatives.

In order to implement both green initiatives and digitalisation, the Commission should extend the EU roaming-free zone from being a member-state exclusive within the Western Balkans region. This would level the players in the field of telecoms market, especially in highly rural countries. A new regulation enforcing that businesses are supported by the EU shall meet certain environmentally friendly standards. This could happen by setting quotas of companies that they can contract with, or a percentage of funds, to be spent with companies that are certifiably green. This would force the market to accept new players as well, which would open up these states gradually in this sector for European convergence.

### **Solution 2: SMEs, local companies and starts-up: re-modelling the economy**

Local companies and start-ups, such as SMEs shall be financially supported by a loan system from the European Commission. The European Commission shall give a boost to local economies, giving liquidity to local companies. This would renew the markets, already saturated by exclusive groups, by bringing new smaller players in the market through the EU's support. Thus, the European Commission should be a watchdog in this situation, thus, control the eligible businesses. In the long-term, these businesses could grow and successfully become new industries. Moreover, the Western Balkan region would have the potential of having their own domestic businesses, not be dependent on foreign direct investment.

### **Solution 3: Navigation of the funds via the EU Delegations**

Funding money shall not be given directly to the governments, but to the EU Delegations in the Western Balkan countries shall play a role in this matter. As the EU Delegations are the only EU institution on the Western Balkan's territory, they are directly in contact with the candidate countries. As such, the Delegations should promote the funding options and scrutinise the eligible businesses. The EU Delegations could use both their social media and official website to promote projects and give the opportunity to the SMEs to apply from these platforms. While the Delegations would work at the national level of the candidate counties, the European Commission could support the Delegations' staff by formulating the specific requirements for the eligibility. Transparency and accessibility of the funding are necessary as well. In this process, the Delegations could co-operate with the local municipalities rather than the national government. In this way accountability would be strengthened, while corruption could be diminished.

Clear advantages are a decrease in corruption and thus not receiving sanctions, also bringing good press for those countries. By giving access to funding information to everyone, EU's trust in the region could be strengthened. By giving local businesses a chance to compete for funding, the dialogue between the Western Balkans and the EU could be fostered.

### **Solution 4: Annual Western Balkan start-up competition**

New business ideas are essential to secure the economic success and stability of the Western Balkan region in order to compete globally. Thus, the European Commission shall gather start-ups both from the EU member states and the candidate countries, in order for them to create a more balanced market. This could take place in the format of a competition sponsored by the EU, with an allocation of funds to the winner.

Innovation is inherently a driver of prosperity, and one of the best - but it is not always the preferred route. Hence, a monetary incentive will drive people to think of solutions for their community. This initiative would be most likely be supported by the youngest generations, who are looking forward to entering the job market. Although a possible failure of the start-ups shall be taken into account, start-ups' support is beneficial for the sake of a prosperous future.



## **Policy Option 3: Bilateral issues and diplomatic mediation**

### **Issue**

The Western Balkan region still faces bilateral disputes that jeopardise their path towards membership. One of the outstanding regional disputes is the ongoing bilateral dispute between Serbia and Kosovo. Another prominent discordance exists between Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia. Furthermore, the demarcation of the border between Serbia and Croatia leads to disagreements on territory close to the Danube river. However, for the sake of a successful compliance, good neighbourly relations are a key point for accession negotiations.

### **Solution: The involvement of the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs**

Taking the aforementioned issues into consideration, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs (HR) shall take the lead in this matter. The HR, who is also Vice-President for the European Commission is considered the eligible EU official to carry such task as he covers both EU's external issues, while serving the European Commission. Thus, his position would enhance co-operation between the European Commission and the European External Action Service.

Although this change would lead to a consistent policy change and a retreat from the current approach, the EU as a whole would benefit from it. Currently, the border disputes between Croatia-Serbia and Croatia-Montenegro could lead to a veto from Croatia. The HR as an impartial mediator would ensure that both parties can express their concerns for an agreement to be reached. This approach might help avoid a veto from Croatia. Furthermore, this would contribute to security and peace in the Western Balkans, neighbours of the EU.

As for the disadvantages, the role of the mediator would mean an additional cost for the EU and tasks for the HR. Therefore, the European Commission shall create an extra budget for this issue or transfer funds from one project to the HR.

## **Policy Option 4: EU-Western Balkans Relations**

### **Issue**

The new methodology sought to address unresolved issues; however, it is still facing challenges. First of all, the solutions provided by the revised means of approaching the Western Balkans are addressed only to North Macedonia and Albania. This point could be the cause for discriminatory feelings among different state actors and citizens, which could entail risks for further disputes, both between Western Balkan countries, as well as the whole region and the EU. Secondly, the new framework that was introduced is still deemed as vague, because it bestows generic guidelines for spreading EU norms and values, whereas there ought to be specific tools that actively result in citizens engaging with the EU. The lack of specific proposals and solutions, combined with the increasing influence of third countries, could lead the region to distance itself from the EU. Therefore, it is believed that the Commission shall make greater efforts to listen to local needs and provide realistic, attractive alternatives to other projects and funds. Taking the aforementioned into consideration, it is considered that the following policies would facilitate the negotiations process and ameliorate the relations between the EU and the Western Balkan countries.

### **Solutions**

#### **Solution 1: Expansion of the new methodology**

The new methodology should target a wider group. In other words, state actors that have engaged in access negotiations in the past, or that wish to and are eligible for in the future should be included. Such initiative will show the EU's willingness to reflect on the setbacks of the previous negotiations and reinitialise dialogue under healthier circumstances. While it could be understandable that applying the new methodology to Montenegro and Serbia as well, might be time consuming and difficulties could arise to amend their already existing framework, it is believed that that the advantages are more than the disadvantages. In other words, including Montenegro and Serbia to the new methodology would mean for the EU a faster, effective and efficient enlargement process. Moreover, coupling Montenegro and Serbia to Albania and North Macedonia could also lead to a cheaper package.

### **Solution 2: the notion of science diplomacy**

There should be a stronger nurturing of the notion of science diplomacy, combined with initiatives to engage with locals. A novel concept that is becoming prevalent in several countries is the living lab. Whereas living labs regularly involve experimentation and evaluation, this is not applicable to the EU initiatives for the Western Balkans, since the respective governments are responsible for implementation of reforms. Nonetheless, an EU living lab could entail co-creation, where citizens and EU officials could collaborate to map the divergence in views and constraints, as well as possible scenarios, concerning the EU. Moreover, this lab can incorporate the exploration element, where EU officials engage with all stakeholders, including citizens, to formulate a list of scenarios about the accession negotiations, as well as the future of these countries within the EU. Finally, an additional concept is advised to be introduced, which is recommendations to the state actors involved, which will be addressed by high-rank EU officials, portraying their direct engagement with every stakeholder, including citizens.

### **Solution 3: Establishment of research/educational institute**

By establishing a research/educational institute, in which locals can have direct access, is contemplated to have a positive impact on the EU-Western Balkans relations, and to raise awareness about the EU within the local communities. In the aforementioned institutions citizen science communities can be inaugurated, where locals can contribute to generation of knowledge on topics such as air pollution. Through this way, citizens can have a feeling of contribution. In addition, this initiative will facilitate the EU's efforts to obtain data necessary to address the issues the Western Balkans are facing.

### **Solution 4: Rework the communication plan**

By reworking of the communication plan would have a strong positive effect on the relations of the EU with the Western Balkans. Whereas social media platforms are adequately developed and facilitate engagement, more interactive means of communication are deemed to be in order. More specifically, collaboration between EU and Western Balkans universities could be enhanced through interactive panels, webinars and career days for the sake of dialogue as well as share norms and values. This could be an opportunity to bridging the cultural gap between the two and to reflect on how similar we all are.

## Conclusion

The Enlargement fatigue and the political and societal situation in the Western Balkan region has distanced these countries from membership. The new methodology has been a first step towards re-starting enlargement with fair criteria for the sake of welcoming new members that are in line with the EU *acquis* and Copenhagen criteria. However, focusing on the society as well as the economies with strong attention to sectors such as green energy and technology, will result into a more effective and efficient engagement with the region.