

## **A CREDIBLE EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE FOR THE WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES**

Europe is facing increasingly significant geopolitical and security challenges, which threaten the European way of life, based on shared fundamental values. The South-East European countries, that are treading the path of European integration, encounter the same challenges and are therefore in need of strong support.

The European Union's active commitment to a credible European perspective of the Western Balkan countries contributes to the stability of the region, empowers these countries' societies and political institutions, and at the same time brings them closer to the EU. Not only could such action by the EU increase these countries' resilience to the many threats and challenges they are facing, but it would also help the EU itself to develop practices and procedures contributing to strengthening of the Union and enable it to identify and respond to threats in a timely manner. Such action undoubtedly also enhances the EU's capacity for responsible global leadership.

We have been witnessing increasingly serious and severe adverse activities both within the European Union and in the countries of the Western Balkans. Without the EU's strong presence in these countries and without its focus on their development and implementation of key reforms, they could become a fertile ground for the ever more powerful and dangerous hybrid activities of third countries and actors. The EU's contribution should not be limited to financial resources, but should also include the transfer of Member States' experience and knowledge, thus significantly reinforcing the Western Balkan countries' commitment to the European perspective. An adequate and effective overall pre-accession financing is needed to unleash full potential of the transformation.

Technical assistance, information sharing, joint projects, but also joint operations by FRONTEX and the countries of the Western Balkans are essential to strengthen these countries' capacities to oversee and control their borders, which is unquestionably in the EU's own interest. A more structured dialogue, responsible partnership, additional joint activities, the strengthening of strategic communication with each other, the transferral of experience and knowledge, and the strengthening of security and defence capacities should contribute to the consolidation of all the structures in the Western Balkan countries.

A clear and credible EU accession perspective for the Western Balkans remains crucial driving force of transformation, fostering reconciliation, securing stability in the region, as well as of promoting EU values, principles and standards. The 2018 European Commission Strategy for the Western Balkans encouraged the activities of the Union and the Member States and positively resonated in the region. A year on, these partner countries achieved visible progress and demonstrated their commitment to the European perspective, albeit with varying intensities. The EC strategy for the Western Balkans has also given new impetus to relations between the Union and the region, targeting areas where partner countries from the Western Balkans need further reforms and further efforts.

On 5 February 2020, the European Commission put forward a proposal for a more credible, dynamic, predictable and political EU accession process. The new enlargement methodology foresees that when partner countries meet the objective criteria, the Member States would



agree to move forward to the next stage of the process, with respect to the merits-based approach. To ensure credibility, it must be made possible for every country that will have met the set criteria to take the next step on its European path – including, but not limited to, the opening of accession negotiations with the Republic of North Macedonia and the Republic of Albania, granting candidate country status to Bosnia and Herzegovina and implementation of visa liberalisation with Kosovo\*.

The accession process is based on a set of established criteria, fair and strict conditions, and merit-based principle. Joining the EU requires the implementation of complex reforms in a challenging environment. Candidate countries, as well as potential candidate countries, are required to achieve tangible and sustainable results in key areas, particularly when it comes to fundamental democratic, rule of law and economic reforms, as well as alignment with core European values.

The EU and the Western Balkans share the same continent, culture and history, as well as the same challenges. A firm, merit-based prospect of full EU membership for the Western Balkan countries is key to ensure both their and European Union's ability to rise to the challenges ahead.

(Possible)

Points of discussion:

- What future for the Western Balkans? How to promote and maintain the EU's ambitious and credible stance on enlargement?
- How to better promote EU's strategic interests in the region – the role of parliamentarians?
- How to facilitate implementation of necessary reforms in the region, especially through inter-parliamentary dialogue?

---

\* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSC 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

