



EUROPEAN INTEGRATION OF WESTERN BALKANS

A PRACTICAL GUIDE

Jean Monnet Module Project

**“EU Integration of Western Balkans: Patterns
and Issues”**

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ALBANIA

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Why European Union?

Albania's history of democratization follows the promotion agenda of the western alliances. Since 1990s, Albania has strategically defined its westernization process as an approach of integration in regional and international organizations. A potential EU membership is the end goal of Albania's desire to completely break out from its "post-communist image". Moreover, EU membership remains a foreign policy priority as it is also seen as a platform of internal sustainable development and national well-being.



Beginning of Dialogue

This process dates in 1991, the time when Albania had just begun its transitory phase to democracy by abolishing its communist regime; The European Economic Community and Albania established their diplomatic relations for the first

time 28 years ago eventually leading to many more steps until

today. With the liberalization of the market, one year later the right conditions came along for the economic relationship to flourish between the two. Thus, in 1992, Albania and the EU established a Trade and Co-operation Agreement. Moreover, Albania became also eligible for the Phare Program funding, which at that time was a pre-accession instrument for the Central and Eastern European countries. Agreements came to be extended five years later after the inner turmoil Albania dealt with, when the EU set its conditionality in terms of bilateral agreements – both political and economic. This step signified a path of commitment from both sides.

The EU later proposed its major integration project targeting the Southeastern European countries – the Western Balkan states – named the Stabilization and Association Pact. This integration project intensified the process and enabled Albania the eligibility for another fund (CARDS). During 1999 and 2000, Albania and the EU extended their cooperation further in economic fields by making Albania part of the Autonomous Trade Preferences along with duty free access to EU markets.



Strengthening of Relations

What signaled a peak moment in relations between Albania and EU was the Stabilization Association Agreement (SAA) as the Feira European Council (19-20 June 2000) declared that all countries taking part in the SAA were

automatically “potential candidates” for the EU. The SAA had already been endorsed by all target countries in the Zagreb Summit (2000), but negotiations begun in January 31 of 2003

through the EU Commission president of the time, Mr. Romani Prodo. A few months later, in June, the Thessaloniki Summit officially declared the SAA as the main policy framework of the EU towards the Western Balkans via the political and economic conditionality.

This marked a huge step for Albania and moreover, efforts were being made at the time for a Europe for Albania Partnership which was officiated in 2004. Two years later in Luxembourg, on June 12, the SAA was signed among all target countries – including Albania – and the EU. On December of the same year, the two parties signed the Interim Trade Agreement and established the pre-accession instrument in use of the SAA a year later, which is still in force today: the instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA). Besides economic relations, the integration process also manifested itself in the movement of people; the EU and Albania began talks for visa facilitations with EU member countries on January 1st of 2008.

Albania – EU Relations for more than a Decade

The year 2009 was significant for Albania's road towards EU integration: (1) the SAA fully entered into force in June 3, (2) Albania submitted its membership application to the EU, on April 28, (3) significant steps were made to realize free movement of Albanian citizens to EU member countries. On November 8 of 2010, the EU officially granted visa liberalization for Albanian citizens. Additionally, it adopted an Action Plan with 12 key priorities which were to be dealt with by the Albanian government as part of the integration process. These priorities centered around “the proper functioning of Parliament, strengthening the rule of law, accomplishment of the public administration reforms, fighting corruption and against organized crime, strengthening

property rights, reinforcing the protection of human rights and improving the treatment of the detainees”. In turn, the Action Plan was adopted by the Albanian government on June 10th of 2011.

The progress that Albania has been making over the years in terms of integration has been reflected each year through the yearly SAA progress reports arranged by the EU Commission. These progress reports have worked as a guideline for Albania to meet the EU’s acquis as well as urge the government to meet the required conditions. Over the years the reports have reflected gradual progress of Albania in each respective field. In its 2012 progress report, based on advancements made, the EU Commission gave out positive statements in regard to the granting of “candidate status”. However, this was conditioned to Albania performing well on its national elections as suggested on crucial key priorities: judicial and public administration reform as well as reviews of parliamentary rules of procedure.

One year later, successful results were achieved, and the EU Commission proposed the granting of candidate status to the EU council. As such, on 12 November of 2013 and March 6 of 2014, the EU and Albania engaged in High Level Dialogues meetings based on the 2010 opinion’s key priorities. On June 27 of 2014, the EU Council finally granted Albania its “candidate status” opening the door for a more coordinated and internally demanding process. A month later the Berlin Process led by German chancellor, Angela Merkel took place on August 28th with the aim of establishing a regional framework for the Western Balkans as a unified platform working on three dimensions: political, social and economic through numerous projects. Though these proved to be a great success for the Albanian government, other meetings of High-Level Dialogue took place over the course of 2014-2016. Reports until 2018 urgently call for the need of restructuring and deeply reforming the judicial system.



What Proceeded

As a matter of fact, the status of Albania's progress into EU was not only a matter of domestic developments but also an issue of regional cooperation. The latest high priority document adopted by EU in 2017, 'A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans', evaluates country's progress based on four main criteria (1) Rule of law, fundamental rights, governance, (2) Strengthening the economy, (3) Applying EU rules and standards, (4) Reconciliation, good neighborly relations and regional cooperation as prerequisites for accession.

Albania has made some progress in areas such as justice reform, energy, transport and digital infrastructure development, labor market institutions and services, education and training, and regional cooperation. It notes that the country has aligned its legislation to EU requirements in many areas, enhancing its ability to assume the obligations of membership. Additionally, Albania has made efforts to address bilateral issues with Greece and continued to participate actively in regional cooperation while maintaining good neighborly relations. The progress in labor market institutions and services was made by increasing labor market participation, improving the quality and effectiveness of labor market institutions, and services. Efforts to improve education and training have also been implemented to better address rural areas and vulnerable groups.

However, Albania is still facing challenges with issues such as informal economy, integration into international value chains, research and innovation, administrative capacity,

public procurement and finance management, and migration management.

Albania is facing challenges due to several factors. One of the factors is inadequate institutional capacity resulting from past weaknesses in governance. Also, the impact of organized crime and corruption on public governance and the functioning of the economy and society has not yet been fully addressed. This has impeded progress on a broad set of issues, including administrative capacity and public procurement and finance management.

2020

In 2020, two additional and temporary employment promotion programs were approved for recently unemployed jobseekers laid off during the peak period of quarantine measures due to Covid-19 crisis. One of the programs targets people who self-declare as informal workers prior to their lay-off. The overall budget for active labor market measures for 2020 increased by more than 50% from 390 million Lek to 590 Lek.

The country also faced challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated its structural weaknesses and caused economic fallout that erased some progress. The effective implementation of pandemic measures and vaccination campaigns remained critical to prevent and control the spread of the virus. Health care infrastructure and services needed to be strengthened to respond to public health emergencies and provide essential health care services. Furthermore, the pandemic exposed and deepened existing inequalities and vulnerabilities in the country, requiring a comprehensive response to mitigate the socioeconomic impact on the most vulnerable population groups.

2021

One positive development that happened in 2021 was the creation of a network of anti-corruption coordinators in 17 institutions, which is a positive step in the fight against corruption in Albania.

On health and safety at work, Albania has made progress in adopting most of the legislation transposing the EU Framework Directive, but its implementation and enforcement remains limited due to insufficient financial and human capacities, particularly in the shoe/textile and mining sectors. Reported accidents at work increased, but fatalities at work slightly decreased in the same timeframe.

2022

Albania has continued to implement the Stabilization and Association Agreement and has maintained focus on the EU reform agenda. It has continued to meet all the conditions set out in the Council Conclusions of March 2020 for the first Inter-governmental Conference. Albania's record of full alignment with the EU's common foreign and security policy (CFSP) has been maintained.

Some of the challenges faced by Albania during 2022 include improvement of women representation in local government. Albania is to ensure gender equality and equal opportunities for women, as well as to promote their participation in decision-making at all levels.

2023

In 2023, Albania made progress in Justice, Freedom and Security, with the Specialized Structures against Organized Crime and Corruption building an initial track-record of law enforcement cases. Efforts and resources are required to tackle anti-gypsyism, discrimination, and segregation faced by Roma and Egyptian people, to promote their participation, and to reduce gaps with the rest of the population. On citizenship rights, Albania suspended initiatives related to the establishment of an investor's citizenship scheme, in line with the recommendation from the Commission's sixth report under the visa suspension mechanism.



BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA

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Why European Union?

The EU accession of Bosnia and Herzegovina is the main aim of both entities. But what makes Bosnia and Herzegovina different in contrast to other Western Balkan states? BiH is composed of two entities the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republica Srpska. It has a bicameral legislature and a three-member Presidency. Although this was a plan to save Bosnia from another war, the result is that it made the country less functional and created a climate where the political class blame each other for the continuing failures.



Beginning of Dialogue

The beginning of closer relations between Bosnia & Herzegovina and the EU is associated to 1996, when the EU began to provide help to BiH through Poland and Hungary: Assistance for restructuring

their Economies (PHARE) and OBNOVA programmes. In 1997,

the EU initiated the implementation of a regional approach which supported the implementation of the Dayton/Paris and Erdut Agreements aiming at securing basic stability in the region and establishing political and economic conditionality as a basis of bilateral cooperation with countries in the region. As of then, BiH has started to enjoy autonomous trading benefits for export of its goods to EU countries. The EU/BiH Consultative Task Force (CTF) was established in June 1998 as a joint body to follow the progress of BiH in areas of public administration and regulatory framework.



Strengthening of Relations

A Stabilization and Association Process (SAP) for the five countries of the region including Bosnia and Herzegovina, which served as a political framework in order to develop relations between the EU and the countries in the process,

was proposed in 1999. In June 2000, the European Council in Feira recognized all the SAP countries as “potential candidates” for EU membership. In November of the same year, the regional SAP process was launched at the Zagreb summit.

Furthermore, Bosnia and Herzegovina had the opportunity for customs exemption for its industrial and agricultural products that would be offered in the EU market. In 2001, the European Union provided an EU Country Strategy Plan 2002-2006 that mainly offered technical assistance through the CARDS programmes. In March 2003, European Commission provided to BiH 346 questions about political stability, democracy, human rights protection, economic situation, justice reform and home affairs situation.

In November of 2003, the European Commission undertook a so-called feasibility study that listed 16 priority reforms, wherein substantive progress would serve as the basis for the European Commission to recommend to the EU Council to commence negotiations on the Stabilization and Association Agreement.

Additionally, in 2004 Bosnia's and Herzegovina's Council of Ministers adopted Programme of Action for Implementation of Priorities set by Feasibility Study. This programme had the support of Parliamentary Assembly and also the support of political parties. In 2004, Bosnia and Herzegovina signed the Framework Agreement that opened the access to Community Programs.

The negotiations for Stabilization and Association Agreement were opened in Sarajevo on the 25th November 2005. But the agreement could get finalized only in 2007 due to major disagreement over the police reform. The SAA was initialed on 4 December 2007 by Prime Minister Nikola Špirić. The initialing came in the wake of successful negotiations by Miroslav Lajčák in regards to passing his new quorum rules laws and also the commitment of Bosnian and Herzegovinian politicians to implementing police reform. Following the adoption of the police reforms in April 2008, the agreement was signed on 16 June 2008.

An Interim Agreement on Trade and Trade-related issues was signed on the same day as the SAA, and entered into force on 1 July 2008. The Interim Agreement was the legal framework for trade between Bosnia and the EU between 2008 and 2015. After four months, the Visa facilitation and readmission agreements came into force in 01/01/2008.

Bosnia & Herzegovina – EU Relations for more than a Decade

Bosnia and Herzegovina & EU signed a financing agreement for the instrument for pre-accession assistance (IPA) 2007 National Programme back in 2008. What marked a milestone for Bosnia in terms of EU integration was the agreement on free visa regime. In 2010, citizens from Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina were given the right to travel to Schengen countries without a short-term visa. The agreement entered into force immediately seven months after signature and thus citizens with a biometric passport could freely travel within the Schengen Area.

Advancement in the integration process required from Bosnia the closure of the Office of the High Representative (OHR), so far charged with the mission of implementing the Dayton Peace Accord.

Bosnia and Herzegovina failure to close the OHR resulted in postponing the application until 2016. The European Commission insisted that they would submit the application only when they close OHR or at least reduce and or move it from Sarajevo.



What Proceeded

On 9 December 2016, Bosnia and Herzegovina received the accession questionnaire from the European Commission, the responses to which were submitted in February 2018. On June 20, 2018, the European Commission sent 655 follow-up questions to the Questionnaire. Presidency Chairman of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Milorad Dodik, handed over the answers to the

additional questions on March 5, 2019.

The political situation of Bosnia- Herzegovina remains complex and the European Commission conditions a positive opinion for the country's candidate status upon government functionality at all levels. The long- lasting disagreements between Serb and Bosnia parties rest upon the roots of the political situation.

It is often repeated, by analysts and politicians alike, that the problem is the lack of a common vision for the future for all communities and citizens in the country. For Bosnian citizens, such a vision maybe found in the will to join the European Union, which as a matter of fact nobody seriously denies in the country. All is needed then is to establish roads of communication and plan strategic steps towards realizing this vision.

Throughout 2020, Bosnia and Herzegovina encountered notable obstacles and achieved modest advancements in its pursuit of EU membership. Despite notable achievements such as the removal of the death penalty clause from the Republika Srpska constitution and the successful organization of Sarajevo's inaugural LGBTI Pride Parade, the nation faced challenges like political deadlock, prolonged delays in government formation, and stagnation in critical domains. Notably, the country's constitution continued to contravene the European Convention on Human Rights, with no enhancements made to electoral processes or the transparency of political funding. Moreover, there was a lack of advancement in fostering a conducive atmosphere for civil society, initiating public administration reform, and establishing a skilled and apolitical civil service. Persistent concerns surrounded the judiciary, rule of law, and combating corruption and organized crime. Obstacles remained in safeguarding fundamental rights, including the freedoms of assembly and expression, as well as ensuring the safety of journalists.

Despite Bosnia and Herzegovina's active engagement in regional collaboration and its maintenance of positive relations with neighboring countries, advancements in aligning with EU policies, such as those pertaining to the free movement of goods, agriculture, transport, energy, and consumer protection, remained limited. Overall, the nation remained in the initial stages of preparing for EU membership, highlighting the pressing need for substantial efforts to conform to EU standards and enact associated laws.

In 2021, Bosnia and Herzegovina faced difficulties on its journey to EU membership because of entrenched political and institutional challenges. These obstacles significantly hampered progress, with a noticeable absence of political determination and cooperation among the nation's bodies hindering efforts to bring its legal framework and practices in line with EU standards. Moreover, the country's constitution continued to contravene the European Convention on Human Rights, while efforts to implement electoral reforms aimed at enhancing fairness and transparency in the political system came to a standstill. Ensuring an independent and trusted judiciary, free from political interference and corruption, has proved an uphill battle despite EU recommendations. Similarly, entrenched corruption, organized crime, and lack of operational cooperation between law enforcement agencies continue to tarnish the rule of law. Maintaining an impartial and reliable judicial system, shielded from political meddling and graft, has been a difficult undertaking despite guidance from the European Union. Likewise, deep-rooted corruption, organized criminal activities, and insufficient cooperation among law enforcement organizations continue to undermine the principle of legal authority. On the economic front, Bosnia has made slow and faltering progress. It has struggled to establish a fully functional market economy or improve its competitiveness and preparedness for EU market

forces. Efforts to upgrade infrastructure, improve education quality, and stimulate reforms have had limited success. Aligning with EU rules across crucial areas like the internal market, agriculture, environment, and public procurement has been lacking. However, amid the challenges, some small steps forward have been taken. After more than a decade, municipal elections were eventually conducted in Mostar, while an inter-agency working group was established to deliberate on electoral and constitutional reforms. The country has maintained active regional cooperation and formed a parliamentary committee to guide EU integration following years of deadlock. However, for significant advancement, Bosnia urgently requires gathering strong political will, pursuing comprehensive reforms in the judicial system and public administration, and demonstrating tangible commitment to EU values such as democracy, rule of law, and human rights.

Bosnia and Herzegovina encountered major obstacles in its journey towards EU integration during 2022. Political parties from the Republika Srpska entity obstructed state-level legislative and executive bodies until spring, bringing reforms to an almost complete halt. In a worrying development, Republika Srpska unilaterally sought to take over crucial state competences like taxation, judiciary, defense and security, jeopardizing the country's prospects for EU membership. Some laws were even enacted to withdraw from state institutions and establish parallel bodies at the entity level, though these were temporarily suspended pending constitutional review. Despite intense mediation by the EU and US, parliamentary parties could not reach an agreement on reforms to the constitution and electoral system that would align with the European Convention on Human Rights and the Sejdić-Finci rulings. Proposed amendments to improve electoral standards were also rejected. Widespread corruption remained an intractable problem, with a lack of political will to tackle it and increasing signs of institutions being unduly influenced

by political forces. Systemic shortcomings persisted in the operational cooperation between law enforcement agencies against organized crime, increasing the risk of backsliding.

Among the numerous challenges, the country achieved some favorable progress. A comprehensive, nationwide public finance management strategy was adopted, complemented by public finance management strategies at the entity level. State institutions bolstered certain professional training initiatives, while the Federation entity amended administrative procedures, contributing to public administration reform endeavors. The country's public procurement legislation was further harmonized with EU regulations through amendments passed in August. On the external relations front, Bosnia and Herzegovina improved its alignment with EU foreign policy statements and restrictive measures, reaching 81% by the end of August 2022. It also demonstrated commitment to disaster management by joining the Union Civil Protection Mechanism in September. However, overall advancement remained limited, with the country still in an early preparatory stage for EU membership across most areas. Throughout 2023, Bosnia and Herzegovina grappled with significant political and institutional hurdles that hindered its progress toward EU accession. The elections held in October 2022 saw interventions by the High Representative, including on election day itself, which the OSCE/ODIHR deemed to have undermined legal certainty. Despite attempts at facilitation, constitutional reforms aimed at aligning with the European Convention on Human Rights and the Sejdić-Finci rulings remained elusive. In 2023, the Republika Srpska entity adopted a confrontational approach, passing legislation to disengage from state institutions and establish parallel bodies, although these measures were put on hold pending constitutional review. In a troubling development, the entity assembly in 2023 sanctioned the non-enforcement of Constitutional Court decisions,

significantly eroding legal predictability and the court's authority. Persistent and widespread corruption continued to pose a profound challenge throughout 2023.

Political figures and judicial bodies obstructed efforts to combat corruption, indicating a growing influence of politics over anti-corruption measures. Collaboration among law enforcement agencies to combat organized crime faced obstacles due to inconsistencies in legislation, poor coordination, and limited information exchange. Criminal groups took advantage of legal and administrative gaps, while law enforcement agencies remained susceptible to political meddling.

Financial investigations and the seizure of assets were largely ineffective. There was regression in upholding fundamental freedoms in 2023, with the Republika Srpska reintroducing criminal penalties for defamation against journalists and considering draft legislation that would label civil society groups as 'foreign agents'. Ensuring quality and non-discriminatory education, including overcoming the practice of having 'two schools under one roof', remained an unresolved issue. Cooperation on external relations was hindered as the Republika Srpska advocated for neutrality regarding Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2023, obstructing the full implementation of EU sanctions.

Despite the obstacles faced, 2023 witnessed several encouraging developments. A new government at the state level was established with the support of a governing coalition and enacted pivotal strategies addressing organized crime, anti-money laundering, migration, and terrorism. This administration also endorsed proposed legislation concerning judicial integrity, prevention of torture, treatment of foreigners, and access to information, subsequently ratified by the Parliament. Furthermore, operational activities commenced at the Europol contact point, and oversight responsibility for the war crimes

strategy was assigned to a supervisory body. Progress was made in public administration reform during the year, highlighted by the adoption of a comprehensive public finance management strategy, enhancements to professional growth and performance evaluation frameworks, and the passage of an information access law. However, the implementation of the Public Administration Reform (PAR) action plan remained limited, and the alignment of civil service laws with merit-based principles remained unresolved. In 2023, legislation pertaining to judicial integrity was reinforced through amendments to the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council law, although alterations were introduced that could potentially impede the effectiveness of the asset declaration system. Additionally, alignment with the European Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy saw notable improvements, although challenges persisted in the enforcement of sanctions.

Despite these positive developments in 2023, Bosnia and Herzegovina remained at an early stage of preparation across most EU acquis chapters, with limited to no progress made.

In summary, Bosnia and Herzegovina has encountered numerous formidable obstacles in its pursuit of EU membership, characterized by political deadlock, institutional challenges, and persistent deficiencies in crucial areas like governance, the rule of law, and economic reform. Despite occasional positive developments and incremental advancements, significant disparities persist in meeting EU standards and implementing necessary changes. Achieving EU accession requires united efforts to tackle these issues, necessitating heightened political determination, comprehensive reforms, and unwavering commitment to European principles of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. As Bosnia and Herzegovina continues its path towards integration, overcoming these hurdles will be essential for progressing towards a future defined by stability, prosperity,



KOSOVO

AJLA MAKSUTI & SHYSTI BUSHATI

Why European Union?

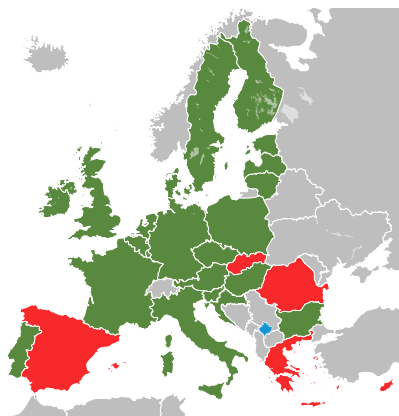
Whilst the debate around EU enlargement to the Western Balkans has received new impetus, the particular path of Kosovo towards EU membership remains stony.

The high investments in Kosovo from the EU, motivated mostly by geopolitical reasons, and the country's leadership narrative of a future embedded in and depending on Europe, have created hopes and expectations among its people. After only 10 years of experience as an independent state, the young country has had little time to build its identity as a sovereign state.

The Politics of Recognition

The Stabilization and Association Agreement, which is one of the first major steps for a country towards closer relations to the EU, was signed between the EU and Kosovo in 2015. The agreement focuses on respect for key democratic principles and core elements that are at the heart of the EU's single market. EU enlargement Commissioner Johannes Hahn talked about "a milestone for the EU-Kosovo relationship". However, progress in

its implementation has been limited by sensitive issues such as the fight against corruption or relations with Serbia.



Normalizing relations between Kosovo and Serbia is one of the most complicated processes not only for the two countries but also for the whole region. However, both sides need steady encouragement from the international community to reach a final solution and progress towards EU membership. Kosovo unilaterally declared independence from Serbia in 2008. As of July 2013, 23 of the 28 member states recognized

the Republic of Kosovo as an independent state while five EU countries, as well as Serbia and Russia, refused to recognize it (Spain, Greece, Cyprus, Slovakia, Romania). The non-recognition of the Republic of Kosovo by the five EU member countries is a major downturn in the path of Kosovo's integration into the EU. Under the current rules, if a country submits an application for EU membership, then this is discussed and decided unanimously by all EU member states at the EU Council. This may complicate the situation in the case of Kosovo because these five states that do not recognize it will potentially oppose or vote against Kosovo's membership to this organization. Even though the Commission, the European Council and the EU Parliament are trying to find ways and opportunities, to sidestep legal-political barriers to the integration path, the "non-recognition" remains one of the biggest problems.

But where do Kosovo and the EU stand?

The EU made improving relations between the two neighbors a

precondition for their entry to the EU. Regular meetings between both countries' leaders take place as part of the EU-facilitated Dialogue for the Normalization of Relations between Belgrade and Pristina.



At the end of the day, the ultimate goal of an ongoing dialogue should not just be to place flags of Kosovo and Serbia in front of the EU buildings. But, the ultimate goal should be to integrate EU standards, principles and values to the citizens of both countries and the whole Western Balkans region.

As per regard of trade and investments, the European Union is Kosovo's biggest trading partner. The EU's contribution to total Foreign Direct Investment was 1.18 billion in 2017. Moreover, the EU is the largest provider of financial assistance to Kosovo. Around €1.48 billion in EU assistance funds were provided during the years 2007-2020; €149 million given in European Investment Bank loans since 1999 and €95.7 million in Western Balkans Investment Framework grants since 2009.

In 2015 – 2016 over 2200 participants in student, academic and youth exchanges under ERASMUS+ brought a greater impact to the mobility and empowerment sector. Approximately 259 'Young Cells Scheme' grants have been awarded to public administration scholars, adding up 3500+ young and disadvantaged people received employment and entrepreneurship training.

The European Union has always been fond of supporting transformation. As a country which has undergone a fragile transition, strengthening democracy, rule of law, justice, reforming public administration, strengthening competitiveness and supporting business development are considered to be



foremost on the path of Kosovo towards Europeanization. Especially the improvement of the rule of law is considered to be one of the main targets of the European reform agenda. The European Union Rule of

Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX) is the largest civilian mission ever launched under the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) of the European Union. EULEX supported selected Kosovo rule of law institutions on their path towards increased effectiveness, sustainability, multi-ethnicity and accountability, free from political interference and in full compliance with international human rights standards. Part of the process of the rule of law is fighting corruption and organized crime. This is the last condition Kosovo has to meet in order to get visa liberalisation. Nevertheless, this is not a condition per se, it is a process. What EU stands for is the maintenance of a good and stable process, which commits Kosovo further to the process of fighting corruption and organized crime.

What Proceeded?

The Republic of Kosovo is the only state in the Western Balkans whose citizens cannot benefit from visa-free travel. Kosovo is working unilaterally to meet the preconditions for visa liberalization. “A new, dynamic and goal-oriented society” is what Kosovo’s citizens believe that they are. As Europe’s youngest society, they acknowledge the fact that they can provide a lot to Europe. But they need to be given a chance for this. Europe should open the door to one of the oldest societies and, at the same time, one of the newest states. The people of Kosovo regard this as a win-win situation.

The European path of Kosovo should not remain an aim it itself

but the result of the efforts of the country which after a bloody past is tackling its main challenge, creating a functioning state that sustains peace for its people. This is precisely what young people in Kosovo should hold their leaders accountable for.

Kosovo saw substantial political and economic changes between 2019 and 2023 that were characterized with rapid advancement but ongoing difficulties as well. Elections that produced a government headed by Vetëvendosje in 2019 defined the political landscape and signaled a change to a more reform-focused administration. Nonetheless, the early years were marked by political unrest, numerous changes of leadership, and difficulties in preserving a solid coalition.

Political stability was ensured by the Vetëvendosje-led government's strong majority in the Assembly from June 2021 to June 2022. Despite this, the divisive political climate and challenges in obtaining an adequate number of members for decision-making stemmed from mishandling the legislative agenda and opposition abstention, which made the Assembly's position difficult. Well-run municipal elections represented a significant advancement, but persistent flaws in the electoral system remained. Corruption, organized crime, and freedom of speech were problems in the north of Kosovo. There was little progress made in the area of public administration reform, despite some significant initiatives including the creation of new salary laws and broad strategies. The judicial system continued to be ineffective and susceptible to improper influence, requiring better application of the instruments already in place. Although there were some legal accomplishments in the fight against corruption, structural improvements needed more political commitment. There has been little success in the wars against terrorism and organized crime; full use of the legal frameworks is required. There was some dedication to gender equality and

the protection of human rights, but problems with resource allocation and enforcement persisted. Following the pandemic, the economy showed resiliency, but growth in the private sector was hampered by structural issues like high levels of corruption and lax application of the law. Kosovo made very modest progress in adapting to the pressures of the EU market, especially in the energy and education sectors.

In the subsequent period from June 2022 to June 2023, the Vetëvendosje government continued its EU reform agenda amidst a lack of cross-party cooperation and Srpska Lista boycotts. Legislative achievements included electoral reform, but normalization with Serbia remained a pressing issue, with the need for more commitment to Dialogue agreements. The north faced heightened tensions, including a violent attack on Kosovo Police and issues over vehicle re-registration, leading to Kosovo Serb resignations and low turnout in local by-elections. Public administration reform stagnated with new legislation under review and gaps in administrative capacities. The judicial system saw limited progress, requiring stronger integrity and efficiency measures. Anti-corruption efforts made limited headway, needing more proactive investigations and asset confiscations. Organized crime combat saw limited success, with necessary tools underutilized. Efforts against terrorism and money laundering continued, but alignment with EU standards was incomplete. Human rights protections required better enforcement and resource allocation, with progress needed in gender equality and non-majority community rights. The economy showed moderated growth with high inflation impacting investment and consumption. Kosovo's capacity to cope with EU market forces remained at an early stage, with efforts in road infrastructure and digitalization, but energy supply issues persisted. Regional cooperation was stable, but formal relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina remained unchanged. Progress

in EU standards alignment varied, with advancements in some areas like digital transformation and energy, but limited progress in others such as public procurement and agriculture. Overall, Kosovo's administrative capacity and sectoral coordination need improvement for effective EU acquis implementation.

Throughout these years, Kosovo's journey towards EU integration has been marked by incremental progress in several areas, yet hampered by significant internal and external challenges. The political stability brought by the Vetëvendosje-led government provided a foundation for reforms, but the lack of cross-party cooperation and regional tensions, especially with Serbia, have consistently posed obstacles. The economic resilience demonstrated during the pandemic and subsequent crises underscored Kosovo's potential, yet systemic issues like corruption, rule of law weaknesses, and administrative inefficiencies continued to impede comprehensive development. As Kosovo navigates its path towards EU membership, sustained efforts in judicial reform, anti-corruption measures, and regional cooperation will be crucial to achieving its European aspirations.

Key stake to Progress: Normalization of Relations with Serbia

The EU-facilitated dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia has made significant progress, culminating in an agreement on 27 February 2023 and an implementation annex on 18 March 2023, both integral to the EU accession processes of the two countries. Despite these advancements, neither Kosovo nor Serbia has begun implementing their obligations, including the establishment of the Association/Community of Serb Majority Municipalities (A/CSM), and both are urged to engage constructively and without delay. The European Council expressed regret in October 2023 over the lack of progress, emphasizing that normalization is crucial for their EU accession paths, with significant opportunities at risk

without advancement. Negative developments have hampered dialogue efforts, such as the increased presence of Kosovo police in the north, the mass resignation of Kosovo Serbs from institutions, roadblocks, and election boycotts.

While there have been some positive steps, like the tentative agreement on energy roadmap functions in August 2023 and the political declaration on Missing Persons in May 2023, the implementation of past dialogue agreements remains largely stalled. The withdrawal and election boycott by Kosovo Serbs violated Serbia's obligations, and no significant progress has been made on the 2015 agreement for the A/CSM, despite a European proposal presented in October 2023. Additional unresolved issues include the pending technical agreements from 2011-2012, the incomplete implementation of the Freedom of Movement agreements, and the Telecoms Agreement. Furthermore, serious incidents such as the attack on Kosovo Police in September 2023 and the violent protests following the installation of Kosovo Albanian mayors in May 2023 have further strained relations.

The EU has called for immediate de-escalation, the holding of new elections, and a return to dialogue, stressing that failure to de-escalate will have consequences, as reiterated by the European Council in October 2023. Moving forward, Kosovo and Serbia are expected to engage more constructively, uphold their dialogue commitments, and avoid actions that undermine stability. Creating a conducive environment for concluding a legally binding normalization agreement is crucial for both countries to advance on their respective European paths. Reaching such an agreement is urgent and essential to ensure that Kosovo and Serbia can fully capitalize on their EU accession prospects.

Since the EU-Kosovo Stabilisation and Association Agreement

(SAA) came into force in April 2016, Kosovo has made notable strides in political dialogue and sectoral cooperation, exemplified by multiple Stabilisation and Association Council and subcommittee meetings. The National Programme for European Integration 2023-2027 and the European Reform Agenda (ERA) Phase II underscore Kosovo's commitment to EU integration, emphasizing governance, rule of law, and economic reforms. The government's EU membership application in December 2022 and the upcoming visa liberalization starting January 2024 mark significant milestones. Financial support from the EU, including IPA II and IPA III funds, has been instrumental, with contributions for public administration reform, socio-economic recovery, and COVID-19 assistance. Kosovo has also benefited from the Economic Investment Plan (EIP) and regional initiatives like the Energy Support Package. Enhanced cooperation with Europol, participation in EU programs, and the ongoing role of the EULEX mission highlight strengthened rule of law and border management efforts. However, persistent challenges remain, particularly in relations with Serbia, exemplified by the recent escalation in northern Kosovo and subsequent EU measures, including the suspension of SAA bodies' work and financial programming. Kosovo's alignment with EU sanctions against Russia and support for Ukraine demonstrate its commitment to European solidarity. The path forward depends on Kosovo's ability to de-escalate tensions, uphold dialogue commitments, and implement necessary reforms to progress towards EU accession.



NORTH MACEDONIA

OLIGERTA KULA & MARKO MERAJ

Why European Union?

“The Sun, too, is a star.”

The Republic of Macedonia has been a candidate for accession to the European Union since 2005. Accession to the EU has been defined as the highest strategic priority for the country’s government. Currently, it is one of five remaining candidate countries, together with Iceland, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey.

Beginning of Dialogue

After the breakup of Yugoslavia, Macedonia was supposed to require a democratic way, which would guarantee security, stability and prosperity. Since the EU is based on freedom, democracy, respect for freedoms and human rights, rule of law, Macedonia was determined to join those European values (Aleksovski, p.124). Thus in 2001, the country signed a Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with EU.

State during these last 11 years, was on track to achieve all the tasks defined by MSA, particularly those planned for implementation in the first phase under Chapter V (movement of workers, goods, services and capital). European Council in December 2005 gave

Macedonia a candidate country status, while in November 2009, the European Commission recommended the Council to begin negotiations with Macedonia, as well as this, should go in the second phase of implementation of the SAA.

These recommendations were also reiterated in the Commission report of 2010, while Council has not yet received a positive attitude about the recommendations of The European Commission (Progress Report, 2011, p.4) Today, Macedonia is expecting the date to start negotiations with the EU, while statements from EU officials often point out that such a thing strictly conditioned by the resolution of the dispute with Greece over the name of the country.

In relations with the EU, Macedonia scored some important dates:

- In **1995** established diplomatic relations with EU.
- In **1996** signed the first bilateral agreement on the use of the PHARE program.
- In **1997** signed a cooperation agreement which entered into force in 2004, and the Agreement on textiles which is in force since 1998.
- In April **2001** signed the SAA, and the same came into force in April 2004.
- On March 22, **2004** filed a request for EU membership.
- In **2004** led National Strategy for EU Integration.
- On December 16, **2005** received candidate status for membership.
- In 2007 adopted the National Strategy for the approval of EU law, brought national development plan for the period **2007-09** as well as pre-accession economic program.



Strengthening of Relations

The naming dispute has been labeled as a continuous obstacle for Macedonia to full membership, whereby Greece objected diplomatic recognition of the country under the name of “Republic of Macedonia”. However, on 27 June 2018, following the withdrawal of Greek opposition as part of the Prespa Agreement to adopt “Republic of North Macedonia” as name of the country, the EU approved the start of accession talks, which are expected in 2019, provided certain conditions are met.

This historic step would not have been possible without Greece’s parliament voting on January 25 to ratify the Prespa agreement between the two governments, which ends an almost three-decades dispute over the name of the Macedonian state. For years this was the main stumbling block to Macedonia’s accession to NATO and the European Union. In 2008, NATO issued a conditional invitation to the country contingent upon it and Greece resolving their differences.

The government’s motto for the candidacy is “The Sun, too, is a star”, referring to the sun from the flag of North Macedonia being displayed among the other stars in the flag of Europe, in the official logo of the candidacy.

North Macedonia is currently receiving EUR 1.3 billion of development aid until 2020 from the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance, a funding mechanism for EU candidate countries.

The Macedonian government has established a management

infrastructure for the European integration process on the basis of a paper adopted in 1997 under the title “The strategic bases of the Republic of Macedonia on achieving the membership of the European Union”. It consists of the following institutions:

- *The Committee for Euro-Atlantic Integration plays the central role in the decision-making of the country’s policies in the European integration process. It is chaired by the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Ministers, all ministers in the Government, the Governor of the National Bank of the Republic of Macedonia and the President of the Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts are members of the Committee.*
- *The Working Committee for European Integration of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia (WCEI) – It is chaired by the Deputy Prime Ministers in charge of EU Integration, whose deputy is the Minister of Economy. The members are the secretaries from all Ministries. It is an operational, inter-ministerial body establishing the methods and dynamics for implementation of strategic decisions, political guidelines and priorities of the Government, as well as monitoring the realization of the concrete tasks.*
- *The Deputy to the President of the Government is responsible for the European integration as center in the management and coordination of the operational part of the integration process. Its support and service is the Sector for European Integration within the General Secretariat of the Government of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.*
- *The Sector for European Integration within the Republic’s government is given the task to organize, coordinate and synchronize the EU integration process. It is organized in seven units in charge of the approximation of the national legislation with that of the EU, translation of the EU legal acts, institution building, support to the WCEI, coordination of foreign assistance, and information to the broader public on EU and the European integration process.*

- *Departments/Sectors/Units for European Integration within the Ministries have similar structure and competencies as the central Sector for European Integration within the Government, being a key link in the institutional infrastructure.*
- *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs – EU domain – is responsible for communications with the EU structures through the Mission of former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia in Brussels, gathering valid and timely information that have impact on the integration process and presenting the uniform perspectives and positions in the European structures.*



North Macedonia - EU relations for More than a Decade

Political Impetus

The country was the first Western Balkan nation to sign a Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU, which entered into force in April 2004. The SAA aims to liberalize trade for 95% of exports to the EU.

The Joint Parliamentary Committee of the EU and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia was established in 2004. The Committee looks at all aspects of relations between the two parties, particularly the implementation of the SAA. The Republic of North Macedonia was granted candidate country status for EU membership in December 2005. In February 2008, the EU adopted the Accession Partnership for the country, which updated the previous European Partnership agreement of January 2006. Citizens of the Republic of North Macedonia were granted visa-free travel to the Schengen area in December 2009.

Economic Impetus

The EU is the North Macedonia's main trading partner, accounting for 60% of the country's exports and 48% of its imports. Exports from the country are centered around a few products, the most important being: Ferro-nickel alloys, iron and steel, and textiles. The main imports are crude oil, electricity, flat-rolled iron and steel products, and vehicles.

Social Impetus

Civil society organizations can help to drive reforms in candidates for EU membership like the Republic of North Macedonia. Their work can determine the pace and quality of efforts to join the Community – and generate public support for accession. Much of the responsibility for strengthening the role and influence of civil society organizations lies with individual countries. However, the EU also plays a role. It provides financial assistance to civil society projects through its Instrument for Pre-accession (IPA).

The EU also boosts civil society actions by:

- *improving coordination with donors, and working toward the provision of visa-free travel for candidate country citizens.*

The EU established the Civil Society Facility in 2008 to support the development of civil society in South Eastern Europe. Established under the IPA, the Facility provides financial assistance to civil society organizations in North Macedonia so that they can:

- *play a more active role in the political process;*
- *develop cross-border projects and networks;*
- *become more familiar with EU affairs.*

The Republic of North Macedonia wants to become member of the EU. To help achieve this goal, the EU provides continuous support and financial assistance so that the country can undertake any necessary reforms.

Since 2007, the Instrument for Pre-accession (IPA) has enabled the country to focus on making changes in five key areas:

- *Institution building,*
- *Cross-border cooperation,*
- *Regional development,*
- *Human resources, and*
- *Rural development.*

Between 2007-2013, the EU provided the country with €622 million through the IPA. (The country also benefited from the regionally focused IPA Multi-beneficiary Programme.) IPA II is now providing similar assistance between 2014 and 2020, through a funding allocation of €664.2 million.



What to Expect

The political will for membership of Macedonia in the EU has not proved effective in improving the situation in this country. For citizens of Macedonia, the determination of the date for the beginning of negotiation for accession to the EU is a hope to come out from the difficult social situation, economic and political situation. This process anyway will last. However, the citizens of this country for over two decades are waiting for a better future, which has not happened so far. The state still continues to face with internal problems (democracy, rule of law, politicization of administration, inter-ethnic problems...) and external problems. Their solution is a prerequisite for getting the date for the beginning of the negotiation, while evaluating the current situation may conclude that this process will last a long time also. In a word,

the development of negotiation, as the next stage in the process of Euro-integration, requires genuine commitment and a more correct approach to real problems. Meanwhile, the development of negotiation would also require the commitment of all-available capacity and commitment to new human resources outside government institutions, which can contribute to this process.

North Macedonia 2019-2022

Progress: In June 2018, the Council set out the path towards opening accession negotiations in June 2019. The Commission has continued to thoroughly monitor the reforms set in the Council Conclusions and EU-related reforms across all sectors. The entry into force in February 2019 of the historic agreement with Greece (also called the ‘Prespa agreement’) was a major breakthrough and sets an example of reconciliation for the region and beyond. In June 2019, the Council postponed its decision to no later than October 2019. The European Council decided in October 2019 to ‘revert to the issue of enlargement before the EU-Western Balkans summit in Zagreb in May 2020’. The Commission has continued to closely monitor developments in North Macedonia and reported in March 2020 that North Macedonia has increased its efforts and delivered further tangible and sustainable results in the key areas identified in the Council Conclusions of June 2018 such as the judiciary, fight against corruption and organized crime, intelligence services reform and public administration. On 26 March 2020, the European Council endorsed the Council’s decision to open accession negotiations with North Macedonia. On 19 July 2022, the first Intergovernmental Conference on accession negotiations took place with North Macedonia, following the approval of the Negotiating Framework by the Council. The Commission immediately launched the analytical review of the EU acquis (screening) process, which is the first step in the negotiating process. The authorities have continued to

demonstrate, including publicly, their commitment to advancing on their EU path. North Macedonia has also fully aligned with the EU positions on the war in Ukraine, demonstrating thereby once more that it is a reliable partner. The country's existing challenges have been exacerbated by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and by new risks stemming from Russia's aggression against Ukraine, including high energy, commodity and food prices, combined with supply-chain disruptions. North Macedonia has taken measures to mitigate the impact of the war.

Relations with the EU: The country continued to implement its commitments under the SAA. On 4 December 2018, the SA Council adopted the decision on the passage to stage II of the SAA, based on the Commission's 2009 proposal. The Stabilization and Association Committee took place in June 2021. Discussions focused on the decision to open accession negotiations and the progress made in advancing EU reforms, in particular in the areas of the fundamentals and the strengthening of good neighbourly relations. North Macedonia has reached 100% alignment with EU common foreign and security policy positions and declarations over the reporting period. North Macedonia continued to actively participate in EU crisis management missions and operations under the common security and defense policy.

IPA I (2007-2013)

Has been progressively and implemented and finalized and by the end of 2018 62.7% of all funds allocated for the country under IPA I have been paid.

IPA II (2014-2020)

By the end of 2018, programmes totaling EUR 395 million have been adopted, out of which EUR 151 million have been already

contracted. Significant progress was made on a sector-based programming involving all stakeholders. The programming of the IPA II funds was successfully completed bringing the IPA package for the country to EUR 633 million. Of this amount EUR 214 million have been already contracted by end 2019.

As part of the response to the COVID-19 crisis, North Macedonia has benefited from EUR 4 million for urgent medical equipment, all of which has been delivered, and EUR 62 million for socio-economic recovery measures under IPA II. This package is being complemented by a macro-financial assistance (EUR 160 million in loans). In 2020, the EUR 50 million performance reward was re-directed towards responding to the health needs, to support the country in its EU integration efforts and to mitigating the economic and social effects of the crisis. As part of the wider COVID-19 response, the EU has also made available a Macro Financial Assistance scheme of EUR 160 million, which has been fully disbursed. The Commission set aside EUR 70 million in grants from IPA II for the Western Balkan partners to reimburse the Member States for the resale of doses they obtained under the EU Advance Purchase Agreements with COVID-19 vaccine producers, of which North Macedonia received EUR 8.2 million. The first vaccines provided under this grant were a total of 651,000 Pfizer doses for the region (including almost 120,000 for North Macedonia) facilitated by Austria, which were delivered between May and August 2021.

IPA III (2021-2027)

A first financing decision of EUR 90.45 million was adopted at the end of 2021, providing support for EU accession and post-COVID-19 recovery, and enhancing the country's reforms in the areas of rule of law, fight against corruption and organized crime, protection of environment, sustainable economic development

and facilitating the trade with the EU. This first set of programmes, complemented by a significant package of multi-country programmes and the rural development programme IPARD III, provide a significant contribution to kick-start the implementation of the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans and the Green Agenda. North Macedonia participates also in cross-border cooperation programmes, transnational cooperation programmes and Union Programmes.

Political Criteria

1. Public Administration

New implementation of the public administration reform strategic framework improved public consultations and increased transparency in policymaking and in the area of policy development and coordination. Steps have been taken to address alleged politicized appointments. However, further efforts are needed to enhance accountability of the administration and prevent its politicization.

Progress was made in improving transparency, with the adoption of the 2019-2021 Transparency Strategy, the operationalization of the open government data portal and the publication of data on government spending. The monitoring reports on implementation of the Public Administration Reform Strategy and the Public Financial Management Reform Programme were produced and accompanied by adequate visibility actions. Ensuring respect for the principles of transparency, merit and equitable representation remains essential.

It adopted the new 2022-2025 public financial management reform programme. However, the adoption of the legislation on

organization and operation of state administrative bodies and the new legal framework for human resources management (revision of the Law on Administrative Servants and the Law on Public Service Employees and a new Law on Top Management Service) have been delayed. The new framework aims to improve the management of human resources across the administration and provide greater assurance for merit-based recruitment, promotion and dismissal, including at senior management level

2. Judicial System

A new law on the Public Prosecutor Office to integrate the Special Public Prosecutor within the prosecutorial system has been prepared. The courts have been delivering judgements on some high profile cases filed by the Special Prosecutor's Office. Beyond legal changes, all judicial institutions need to demonstrate their exemplarity and contribute, through additional efforts, to restoring public trust in the judiciary.

The Law on the Public Prosecutor's Office entered into force in June 2020. The purpose of the law is inter alia to ensure a sustainable solution for the cases of the Special Prosecutor's Office and to establish accountability for the crimes arising from and surrounding the illegal wiretaps. The revised Law on the Council of Public Prosecutors was also adopted. Effective implementation of the legal framework as well as increased efforts by all stakeholders to demonstrate their exemplarity will contribute to increasing public trust in the judiciary.

Most of the implementing legislation of the revised Law on the Council of Public Prosecutors was adopted. A new draft Law on the Academy for Judges and Prosecutors should maintain the Academy as the sole entry point to the judiciary and prosecution and

should secure a fair and transparent access to these professions.

The preparation of a new judicial reform strategy has started, in an inclusive manner, building upon the lessons learnt from the previous one. Implementation of the updated action plan on the judicial reform strategy has continued but needs to become more systematic. The judiciary has demonstrated its commitment to protect its integrity and independence.

3. Fight against Corruption and Organized Crime

The new legal framework for preventing corruption has improved and the appointment of the new members of the State Commission for Prevention of Corruption has been far more transparent than in the previous years. The Commission has taken important steps to proactively fight against corruption, involving high level officials across the political spectrum. The Special Public Prosecutor has confirmed its leading role in investigating and prosecuting high level corruption cases. Further progress was made at the operational level through improving the effectiveness of the National Coordination Centre for the Fight against Organized Crime and participation in joint operations with EU Member States and neighboring countries.

The former Chief Special Prosecutor was convicted in June 2020 in the first instance verdict in the so-called 'racket case' concerning alleged extortion and abuse of office in relation to a case of the Special Prosecutor's Office. Corruption is prevalent in many areas and a more proactive approach from all actors engaged in preventing and fighting corruption needs to be ensured. The country is engaged in threat assessment at the regional level, and will have to broaden its scope in line with the EU practices. There is some progress at the operational level,

but more needs to be done to improve the effectiveness of law enforcement in fighting specific forms of crime, such as money laundering and financial crimes.

Parliament adopted the 2021-2025 National Strategy for the Prevention of Corruption and Conflict of Interest and related Action Plan, consolidating the country's commitment to prevent corruption and sanction corrupt behavior. The cases initiated by the former Special Prosecutor's Office (SPO) continued to move forward, thereby establishing accountability for the illegal wiretaps. A number of cases were subject to first instance rulings and new cases were opened on the basis of investigative material from the former Special Prosecutor's Office. Coordination remains crucial for all stakeholders involved in combatting organized crime. Additional human and financial resources should be made available to the Public Prosecution Office, investigative centers and law enforcements units in charge of investigating corruption. Sectors most vulnerable to corruption require targeted risk assessments and dedicated actions.

4. Fundamental Rights

North Macedonia increased the protection against hate crime and discrimination with amendments to the Criminal Code and the adoption of the Law on Prevention and Protection from Discrimination. It also adopted an ambitious de-institutionalization strategy, and it transcribed its objectives to fight violence against women into an action plan for implementing the Istanbul Convention. However, the external oversight mechanism of the police is not yet fully operational, and the country needs to develop further the use of alternative sanctions and probation. The climate for media freedom and freedom of expression continued to improve. It is essential that public officials and the political elites demonstrate a higher level of tolerance towards

criticism, thereby upholding freedom of expression.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Policy is investing in community services, including to support victims of gender-based violence. It is essential that these services continue to be made available. Additional efforts are needed to address recommendations of European and international human rights bodies, particularly regarding the treatment of detained and convicted persons. The Constitutional Court's decision to repeal the Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination on procedural grounds means that the country currently lacks a comprehensive legal framework on non-discrimination and an equality body.

The Ministry of Labour and Social Policy is investing in community services, including supporting victims of gender-based violence. Important progress was achieved with the adoption of the Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, with cross-party support. An improvement is noted in terms of gender mainstreaming and women's rights, although women are among the categories most severely affected by the pandemic.

5. Regional cooperation

The country maintained its good relations with other enlargement countries and participated actively in regional initiatives. Historic steps have been taken to improve good neighborly relations, including through the entry into force of the Prespa agreement and its implementation, putting an end to one of the oldest disputes in the region.

6. Economic Criteria

Economic growth resumed after a year of stagnation, though investment remained subdued. The government took measures to improve public finance management and transparency. It adopted reforms of income taxation and the pensions system. However, the composition of spending worsened, and fiscal consolidation needs to be more ambitious in order to put public finances on a sustainable path. The functioning of the labor market is impaired by persisting structural problems. Exports and manufacturing output diversified further towards higher-value products. However, skills shortages, and a lack of skills alignment with those required by companies, reflecting shortcomings in education curricula, impair labor productivity and the competitiveness of the economy.

Since April 2020, the COVID-19 crisis has left its mark on the economy and on public finances. The authorities have taken a range of measures supporting companies and households, to mitigate the economic and social impact of the crisis. In the reporting period, fiscal transparency was further improved. However, fiscally significant reforms of income taxation and the pensions system, introduced at the beginning of 2019, were reversed. Moreover, public capital expenditure implementation remained markedly low, and public destabilization is not yet secured.

A gradual recovery set in as of spring 2021. The government implemented a strong fiscal response to mitigate the crisis impact on households and firms. The fiscal deficit rose to 8.2 % of GDP in 2020 while the public debt level rose sharply to 60.2 % of GDP, as additional financing needs had to be covered. Capital expenditure was cut in a budget revision to create space for crisis-related transfer payments, yet it was still heavily under-executed. The authorities took some additional measures to improve fiscal

transparency, although a fully operational state aid registry is yet to be developed.

The government continued to implement fiscal support measures to help the recovery. Helped by rebounding tax revenue, the fiscal deficit fell to 5.4 % of GDP in 2021, while debt levels stabilized after a rising significantly in 2020. With the rise in food and energy prices accelerating in early 2022, the government adopted a new set of fiscal measures to contain the negative impact on the economy, though the fiscal measures could have been better targeted. The central bank tightened its policy stance in view of rising inflationary pressures. Important policy reforms to improve fiscal governance and the sustainability of public finances stalled. After long delays, the new organic budget law, which provides for fiscal rules and a fiscal council, was adopted by the Parliament in mid-September. The management of public investment needs further improvement. The banking sector remained sound. Regulatory measures to ease borrowing requirements were phased out in 2021. The business environment continues to be held back by the large size of the informal economy and by slow progress in streamlining para-fiscal charges. North Macedonia has made.

7. Civil Society

The environment in which civil society operates has continued to improve, with its involvement in policy-making and legislative processes. Strategic documents were adopted, guiding the government's cooperation with civil society organizations. Both governmental and non-governmental actors should ensure that safeguards are in place to further strengthen checks and balances and should aim for a meaningful consultation process. Progress was made towards the regular functioning of the Council

for Cooperation between Government and Civil Society and the adoption of the 2018–2020 strategy, including its action plan. Civil society remained active and played a key role in policy and decision-making processes.

Civil society organizations (CSOs) continue to operate, overall, in an enabling environment. They continued to be active and have an important role to play in the reform process. Further efforts are needed to ensure a more a timely, meaningful and transparent consultation process with civil society. In the context of the challenges faced in recovering from the COVID-19 crisis, governmental and non-governmental actors are expected to build partnerships and to strengthen existing cooperation. Civil society organizations (CSOs) continue to operate in an enabling environment, including with the adoption of the strategy of cooperation with and development of civil society 2022-2024.



MONTENEGRO

KLEA VOGLI & IVANA GJELOSHAJ

Why European Union?

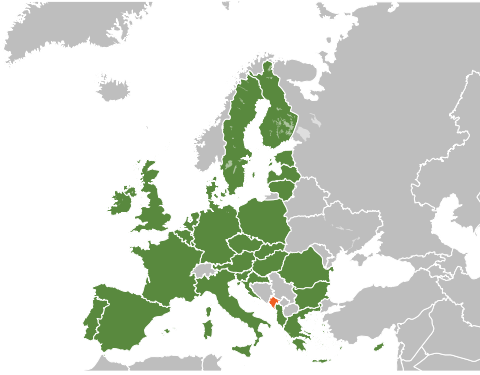
“The future of the Western Balkans lies in the European Union.”

The European Union (EU) has expanded a number of times throughout its history by way of the accession of new member states to the Union. The present enlargement agenda of the European Union regards Turkey and the Western Balkan states of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia. These states must negotiate the terms of their EU accession with the current member states and align their domestic legislation with EU law before joining. European integration offers numerous benefits, particularly; political, economic and social. Knowing that these countries have as a strategic aim the full membership in the EU, this has made the process more dynamic and faster, because we are dealing with a process that entails the same principles and same values that are closely related to regional interests. Regardless of the same orientation on values and geopolitical interest, the Western Balkans is currently in a fragmented level in regard to EU integration. Each of the Balkan countries have had specific and challenging path of transition. Regarding Montenegro the historical transformation plays a crucial role.



Beginning of Dialogue

Yugoslavia was a former federated country that existed in the west-central part of the Balkan Peninsula from 1929 until 2003. After The dissolution of Yugoslavia, it became the federated union of Serbia and Montenegro. In June 2006, Montenegro gained full independence from Serbia following a referendum in May, in which just over the required 55 percent of Montenegrins voted to secede from the federation. On 12 June, the European Union recognized the Republic of Montenegro as a “sovereign, independent state”. By 24 July 2006, it had adopted a negotiating mandate for a Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with Montenegro. All EU Member States recognized the independence of Montenegro and established diplomatic relations with it. Following independence Montenegro launched preparations for the adoption of a new Constitution. The Constitution had to be developed and adopted in line with European values, standards and practices, especially in the area of human and minority rights. It also had to guarantee the independence and the efficiency of the judicial system and assist the European integration process of Montenegro. Montenegro’s European integration was and is the Government’s strategic priority and is now making steady progress through the EU pre-accession process. The Government is also seen as the actor contributing the most to the integration process, and the Assembly, the Office for European Affairs, the media and the members of the negotiating team follow it.



Strengthening of Relations

In order for Montenegro to integrate it requires first of all a legislative alignment with European one besides, Montenegro is moderately prepared with the reform of its public administration and good progress has been made, notably through the adoption of new laws on civil servants and state employees and on local self-government aimed at implementing merit-based recruitment across the public service. Strong political will is still needed to effectively address the depoliticization of the public service and the optimization of the state administration, as well as to ensure efficient implementation and financial sustainability of reforms.

Montenegro's judicial system is moderately prepared and some progress has been made. The legislative framework on the judiciary aimed to increase its independence and professionalism has yet to be fully implemented. Institutional capacity has been strengthened.

Furthermore, Montenegro has achieved some level of preparation in the fight against corruption. Despite some progress, corruption is prevalent in many areas and remains an issue of concern. The operational capacity of institutions has improved; however, all institutions should demonstrate a more proactive attitude.



What to Expect

In the fight against organized crime, there is an initial track record of prosecutions in the fight against smuggling of migrants and against drug trafficking. However, further results are

needed to produce a convincing track record, in particular in the fight against money laundering and trafficking in human beings. On fundamental rights, Montenegro further aligned its legislation with EU standards. Following the progress made on anti-discrimination legislation, Montenegro now needs to ensure that adequate institutional mechanisms are in place. Montenegro remained constructively committed to bilateral relations with other enlargement countries and neighboring EU Member States and an active participant in regional cooperation. The achievement and results of reform represent convincing evidences that Montenegro is on the right path but we must not neglect that European Integration for Balkan countries can be real and achievable only based on regional cooperation and peace.

Main challenges for Montenegro

Although Montenegro has taken positive steps toward EU integration, the past few years have showed some sort of regression, especially when it comes to the political criteria. The political environment has been marked by instability and deep political polarization. Because of an unusual composition, the Parliament of Montenegro has been unable to assemble a clear

and consistent majority to take forward different EU related reforms. Additionally, the influence of the Serbian Orthodox church is seen by many as another destabilizing factor.

When it comes to public administration, there have been some progress throughout the years with the implementation of several laws. The progress of their implementation however, remains limited. Especially problematic has been the continuous staff change of public servants. This has caused an overall loss of the technical knowledge on EU-related matters which is slowing down the reforms.

The area of judicial reform still remains a key condition of integration in the case of Montenegro, similar to most Western Balkan countries. According to EU commission reports, no progress has been made in that area. The most challenging aspects remain lack of strategic planning, lack of accountability and weak leadership which have hindered the ability of the courts to deliver justice.

In the area of fight against corruption, although some progress has been made, it has not been sufficient to solve this phenomenon. Montenegro has yet to update its legislative framework in accordance with the EU acquis. Especially concerning is the deep infiltration of corruption into the state structures. A similar situation was observed even in the area of organized crime. A number of high-profile investigations have been launched investigating the influence of organized crime on governing authorities and judiciary. As EU has recommended, the judicial system of Montenegro needs to have a less ambiguous and stronger commitment to investigating such cases.

Montenegro is moderately prepared for developing a functioning market economy. The government showed a good level of

adaptability in managing the Covid-19 pandemic and robust economic growth continued up to 2022. The main issue is the past year has been the inflationary pressures on the back of higher global commodity prices. However, structural problems persist, including large regional disparities and gender gaps, informality and high youth and long-term unemployment.

Future outlook

Montenegro started its journey towards EU membership talks in 2012, marking a significant step towards aligning with European standards. Despite opening all 33 negotiating chapters, progress has been slow, with only three chapters successfully closed. This stagnation in the accession process can be attributed to an overall lack of political will in recent years. Without a firm commitment to advancing reforms of key areas of integration, Montenegro faces some significant challenges on its path to EU membership. One critical aspect for advancing the accession process remains achieving political stability, which in turn forms the foundation for undertaking necessary EU related reforms.

Important to Montenegro's progress is its capacity to implement judicial reform effectively. The EU has highlighted the importance of ensuring fair and transparent appointments of court members, alongside amending existing laws to align with the EU acquis. Additionally, Montenegro is recommended to improve its anti-corruption strategy, enhancing the tracking and prosecution of high-level corruption cases. While the legal and institutional framework for fundamental rights is largely established, there remains a need to prioritize the protection of vulnerable groups within society.

As Montenegro navigates its EU accession journey, additional

efforts to address these challenges and demonstrating tangible progress remain essential. By working towards political stability, advancing judicial reform, and intensifying efforts to combat corruption and protect fundamental rights, Montenegro can pave the way for a more successful integration into the European Union in the future.



SERBIA

KELSIVA HIDERSHAJ
& INGRIT MELANI

Why European Union?

Serbia can become the 29th member of the European Union. Accession negotiations began on January 21, 2014, but the Balkan country's accession path is not easy. For Belgrade, the start of accession negotiations with the EU is a historic step towards European integration. But no one can say for sure how long the negotiations will last - the Serbs estimate they could last for a period of six years as much as Croatia needed. Serbia is a difficult candidate not only because of history and conflicts with Kosovo, but also because of the economic situation and the shortcomings in respecting the rule of law and the strengthening of political institutions.



What makes this process different for Serbia?

In addition to the Copenhagen criteria, which include democracy, rule of law and economic competitiveness, each EU candidate must meet a

number of specific requirements for its status. For Serbia, such a request was its co-operation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague. In 2008, Kosovo declared independence, which Belgrade officially refused to recognize. However, policymakers in the Serbian capital have signed an agreement with the Kosovo government on a broad autonomy for the Serb community in Kosovo, at the same time limiting Belgrade's influence there.

Meanwhile, the question is: to join EU, should Belgrade recognize Kosovo when five other EU member states (Spain, Greece, Cyprus, Romania and Slovakia) have not yet done so?

Former nationalists who are considered to be a committed EU supporter govern Belgrade. Lastly, support for Serbia's integration has diminished, as a result of factors such as: the rapid recognition of Kosovo's independence from many EU member states, the growing impression that the EU is tired of enlargement, and the fact that Serbia perceives some of the judgments reached by The Hague tribunal. Despite this reserved position towards Europe, Ivan Knezevic of the Serbian non-governmental organization, European Movement in Serbia (EMS) is convinced that in the event of a referendum on the European future of Serbia, a clear majority will vote for EU membership. The next steps in the negotiations will be "harmonizing the laws of the country with EU law and implementing EU standards so that Serbian citizens can see the benefits. Serbs now benefit from close ties with Europe, since 2009 they can enter the Schengen visa-free states. However, many obstacles lie ahead on the road to EU membership.

In the other hand the language used by the European Commission in its latest Western Balkans strategy, published earlier this year, was as diplomatic as you would expect from an organization

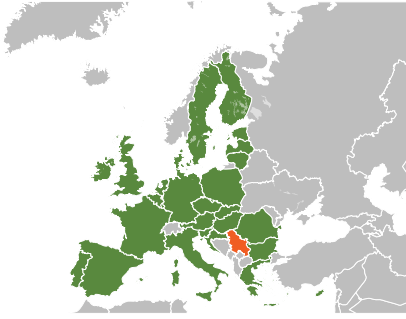
that takes great pride in trying to appease just about everyone: “A strong and sustained political will is necessary to reach consensus on the substantive reforms necessary on the rule of law, and the economy, to promote reconciliation. This needs to be underpinned by comprehensive normalization of relations with Kosovo.”

While making no mention of recognition, the message for Serbia was clear: there will be no membership of the European Union until an accommodation is reached with Kosovo, the former Serb province which declared independence in 2008.



Serbia’s ongoing refusal to recognize the independence of its former province – something endorsed by most, though not all, EU states – is just one example of intractable regional disputes that threaten the Western Balkans’ EU integration.

But in the other side we have seen that Serbia remains in a very peculiar situation on the international scene, where President Vucic has been entrusted with the task of delivering on the issue of Kosovo, beginning with the normalization of relations. An “associate member” of the European Peoples Party (EPP), the biggest and most influential political group in the European Union, Vucic entertains very good relations with a wide spectrum of political leaders, a useful instrument when it comes to gathering public opinion behind Serbia’s national interests.



Strategic Impact of EU Integration

In the current tense geopolitical constellation of the Balkans, Serbia remains a key player whose stability and internal political situation have the power to affect the entire region, more so than any other country. In

a moment in which the domestic scene in Bosnia Herzegovina seems dictated by growing differences and blockages between the three-member presidency, an assertive and divisive Serbian influence over the region could destabilize the fragile cooperation that exists between the three entities. This could cause a disruption in the dialogue that would at this stage reveal fatal, given the heavy deadlock that has characterized Bosnia Herzegovina over the last decade.

Serbia's stability and readiness to cooperate are essential to ease relations with Kosovo and to both countries' positioning, not only within the European Union but as actors on the global scene. The tensions that have arisen after Kosovo's government introduced 100% levies on agricultural products from Serbia (and Bosnia Herzegovina) were followed by Pristina's bold move to declare the transition of its security forces into a real 5,000 unit military force, tasked with protecting the territory, as well as crisis management. NATO's criticism of Kosovo's decision did not stop its parliament from approving the law proposal, 20 years after Kosovo Albanians' uprising against Serbian rule and eleven years after independence.

Serbia's political stability is key to putting in place a pragmatic and sustainable resolution of the border issue with Kosovo: border changes that creating ethnic lines and divides would generate

more instability and resentment in the population, where lives would be strongly affected if Kosovo were to lose its northern part and its Kosovo Serb community, and gain an Albanian ethnic territory instead. A solution is urgent and it must bring a final status for Kosovo, in order to promote general development in the area.

Tensions between Belgrade and Pristina have reached a new peak and failure to resolve the border dispute represents a heavy burden for their respective advancement towards EU membership. A dilution of respect for democratic principles and internal rule of law can effectively slow down Serbia's advancement on the EU path, as several government officials and academic institutions have recently highlighted in reports on the state of advancement towards meeting key EU accession criteria. The protests, therefore, arrive at a moment when Serbia is being questioned on its future political agenda and choices to come, which involve a decision between a continued allegiance to Russia or joining the EU block (including accepting and subscribing to democratic principles that are at present being tested across Europe).



What Proceeded?

The country is acting as a critical player on different fronts, bringing forward the EU integration process while maintaining close relations with Russia, as Serbia is the perfect strategic partner in a region where almost everybody else is part of NATO: Serbia is surrounded by NATO countries (Croatia, Hungary, Rumania, Bulgaria, Montenegro and the soon-to-be Republic of North Macedonia), while NATO is in Kosovo

with its military presence.

Another pillar of Serbian foreign policy is represented by the Non Aligned Movement: many countries in Africa and Asia do not recognize Kosovo's independence and have proven instrumental in blocking Kosovo's entry into Interpol.

Serbia entertains excellent relations with many Muslim countries, such as the United Arab Emirates and Turkey, which are very big investors in the country. Relations with Iran are also positive and Serbia lifted visas for Iranians coming into the country, reintroducing them only after the EU asked the government to put an end to a situation that caused thousands of Iranians using the visa free travel to Serbia to illegally travel into the EU and claim asylum.

Serbia's proximity with Russia, its process of membership with the EU and the friendly relations the country has with the United States make it a very chameleonic and one-of-a-kind actor within a region in which the principles of belonging, membership and clan mentality tend to rule society and politics.

Serbia's internal evolution and its alignment on the international scene are at present completely interdependent from one another. The new European Parliament that will be elected during the May elections will have to deal with the concerns about the rule of law in the country, independence of the judiciary and the effectiveness of the fight against corruption.

Serbia's main responsibility at the European level is to resolve the Kosovo issue: in short, it has the potential to act as a key country, for good and bad.

Serbia – Integration into the EU from 2019 onwards.

Despite EU's approach towards the normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo, relations have continued to remain tense. However, there have been other improvements as well as stagnations in Serbia's accession.

Serbia encountered several difficulties in 2019 as it worked to integrate into the European Union. In politics, real inter-party discussion was necessary to forge a pro-European consensus. Protests against the administration and boycotts by the opposition brought attention to problems with media freedom and parliamentary procedures. Although there were judicial changes in progress, political power remained. There has been little progress in 2021 in the fight against organized crime and corruption; credible, impartial prosecutions were still required. Serbia's economy improved somewhat in terms of market integration and debt sustainability, but structural changes were sluggish. Negotiations with Kosovo necessitated significant work for a solid agreement. Serbia made an effort to harmonize its laws with the acquis of the EU, demonstrating strong readiness in areas such as transport policy and company law, but still requiring improvement in the environmental and climate change domains. Important measures also included addressing issues of non-compliance with the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) and harmonizing with EU foreign policy.

Serbia reiterated its strategic objective of European membership in 2020, notwithstanding the initial remarks made during the COVID-19 controversy that diverged from this pledge. Serbia was badly hit by the pandemic, which prompted strong EU support. Politically, the 2020 June elections brought to light restrictions on voter choice and media bias, along with persistent problems

with legislative procedures and electoral reforms. There was little progress in the reform of public administration, raising worries about openness and merit-based hiring. Reforms to the judiciary stagnated, corruption persisted as a major problem, and organized crime was only marginally defeated. Frameworks for fundamental rights existed, but issues with media freedom persisted. Serbia's economy was still growing, but a decline was anticipated because to the COVID-19 pandemic. EU-facilitated talks have restored relations with Kosovo, but a complete agreement was not yet been reached. Serbia made progress towards conforming to the EU acquis, although it still had issues with environmental regulations and public procurement. The necessity for Serbia to more closely align with EU foreign policy was highlighted by the intensification of relations with global partners such as China and Russia.

Serbia reaffirmed its commitment to EU integration in 2021, reorganizing its Ministry for European Integration and giving EU-related reforms first priority. The European Commission recommended opening these clusters because the government prioritized the rule of law and met competitiveness and environmental goals. Serbia's economy showed resilience in the face of COVID-19 problems, exhibiting a minor recession bolstered by EU funds and strong vaccine efforts. In a divisive environment, political discourse on EU reforms persisted, and initiatives to implement electoral recommendations got underway. Public administration, judicial reforms, fighting organized crime, and battling corruption all saw only modest advancements; nonetheless, cooperation with civil society and freedom of expression still needed to be strengthened. Serbia's economy was resilient and drew foreign direct investment, but structural reforms were slow to proceed. Although there was continued regional collaboration, there were still problems with Montenegro, and the EU-facilitated conversation with Kosovo

needed to be strengthened. Even if some areas still require improvement, Serbia made progress towards aligning with the EU acquis, especially in the areas of energy and taxes. It also made progress in the areas of competitiveness, the green agenda, agriculture, and foreign relations.

Serbia's EU admission talks saw both advancements and setbacks in 2022. Following the early legislative elections in February and the caretaker administration that followed, the pace of reforms decreased. Though no major progress was made, the EU-facilitated talks on normalizing relations with Kosovo went on. Concerns concerning Serbia's geopolitical orientation were raised when it adopted no EU restrictive measures, although aligning with international opinions regarding Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Although enacting legislation to put the new constitutional amendments into effect is still pending, the judiciary has made significant progress as a result of them. Although there has been significant progress in the battle against organized crime and corruption, there are still issues that need to be resolved, such as the need for more effective anti-corruption initiatives and improved organized crime enforcement. A new, more diverse Parliament was constituted in August 2022, but the political landscape remained divided, with the Serbian Progressive Party holding a dominant position. Human rights concerns remained, particularly in relation to how Europride was handled and continuous worries about media freedom. Serbia has made economic progress towards becoming a market economy, but substantial structural changes and advancements in public administration were still necessary.

Serbia opened 22 of the 35 chapters in its EU accession negotiations in 2023, and it provisionally closed two more. This was a significant step for Serbia. Serbia's reforms saw a resurgence in 2023 following a time in which they were slowed

down by a caretaker administration in early 2022. The accords for normalization with Kosovo, agreed in February and March 2023 with EU facilitation, were a noteworthy development. Nevertheless, these agreements have not yet been completely implemented by either party. The violent incident in September 2023 and the subsequent disagreements over car registration and municipal elections—which resulted in the expulsion of Kosovo Serbs from local institutions—kept tensions with Kosovo high. Notwithstanding these problems, Serbia must show greater dedication to pursuing the normalization process and finding positive solutions to these crises.

Serbia's foreign policy alignment with the EU has improved, but it is still uneven, particularly when it comes to the restrictive measures used against Russia. Serbia kept up high-level ties with Russia despite the war in Ukraine, refusing to abide by EU sanctions and only partially agreeing with EU pronouncements on the subject. The geopolitical orientation of Serbia and its adherence to EU foreign policy stances were questioned in light of its tight ties with Russia. Serbia's domestic achievements were uneven. While there were improvements in the areas of judicial independence and anti-corruption initiatives, there were still issues with media freedom and taking a comprehensive approach to combating corruption. Geopolitical unrest and worldwide inflation had an effect on the economy, but Serbia persisted in advancing environmental regulations and infrastructure projects. It is yet to be known whether Serbia will continue to further strengthen its EU initiatives in near future, considering the current geopolitical situation in the Western Balkans and Europe, as well as rising Euroscepticism and nationalism in the country. The Serbian state must concentrate on important tasks like putting the agreements with Kosovo into effect and closer adherence to EU foreign policy, especially with regard to sanctions against Russia. Priorities will include resolving long-standing problems

with Kosovo's normalization process and pushing anti-corruption initiatives, media freedom, and judicial reforms. To fulfil the requirements for EU membership, Serbia will have to show notable advancements in these areas. Furthermore, Serbia's path to membership will depend on its continuous adherence to EU economic and environmental norms as well as the growth of regional cooperation.

A CRITICAL PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTION ON EUROPEAN INTEGRATION OF WESTERN BALKANS

KLAJDI BALLANCA

Looking at the political climate in the WB, one might rightfully state that if it wasn't for the process of joining the EU and the same goals every political party promotes daily on repeat (as if they were playing on a loop the same song), there wouldn't be any unifying elements that would bring the different parties on the same table and have something to agree upon. Additionally, it is a well know fact, that the majority of the population in WB countries is pro EU, and the governments of these countries often go the extra mile to please EU diplomats and representatives. If EU was a religion, our elected leaders would be its apostles.

There are courses on the EU at almost every level of education. Since an early age pupils learn a thing or two about this entity and how it evolved and on an higher level of education, how it functions. Most importantly, to every member of the society the benefits of joining the EU are promoted considerably. The prospects of a better economy, better education, better governance, higher standards of living, social benefits etc, are well know to the average citizen of the WB; which makes me ponder, are there just benefits that the EU brings to us? Should we take a more pragmatic stand on our integration in this organization; when the Brits with a GDP of almost 3 trillion \$ are leaving, well something doesn't fully make sense. Are we just still drunk from some kind of European euphoria that emerged in the 90s or truthfully there is more behind WB's integration into the EU?

Technically speaking, we (the peoples of the WB), have already been in some kind of "European Union". Back in the day it is was

called the Roman Empire. A man in Portugal, a girl in Wales, a woman in Albania and a boy in Germany, were all citizens that belonged to one single political unit. Though this element today might sound unimportant, quoting the roman writer Ennius: “No one regards what is before his feet; we all gaze at the stars.” What Europe is today, it is as a result of the legacy of Rome, I will not go into historical details, but from the languages to the legal systems, we can trace the origins of an unifying theme that is embedded in every EU member state, in the legacy of the Romans.

When two countries share common characteristics and elements such as the above mentioned, they can use the “foundations” in place as excellent bridges in working together. Through this collaboration incredible goals can be reached. The early versions of what would become eventually the EU, were not founded solely and primarily on historical commonalities, but how easy it would have been to communicate between the French and the Italians if their languages didn’t have the same origin, or if Spain and Germany didn’t have the same legal system, or if all these countries that now make up the EU, weren’t in the majority, democratic republics. To note is the fact that almost all of the countries inside the EU and in the WB with a non-Latin alphabet, are changing their alphabets to a Latin based one or have already finished that process.

There are all these small details that make us be better fitted to be inside the EU. Taking for example Albania, its late renaissance was based largely on the revival of the historical figure of its national hero, Skanderbeg. Who held the flag of Byzantium (Rome) for his standard and was the champion of Christianity, the religion of Rome (from the 4th century onward). In Apollonia, close to Fier, (though this fact has not the same magnitude as the previous) the future Roman emperor Augustus would start the journey that would lead him to establish the famed empire.

Cooperation between Albania and EU countries, or all of WB for that matter, is simply natural. The EU already constitutes the biggest economic partners for these countries.

Yet, the “historical card” was never used to help the WB countries join the EU. Some might argue that such element does not apply in the unions decision, but modern history tells us otherwise, when countries with not the most outstanding level of development, democratic or economical, have been welcomed. The only thing that largely prevents a WB country from joining the EU, is its own self. An exhibition of akrasia: “the state of mind in which someone acts against their better judgment through weakness of will.” To put in simple terms, WB states make one step forward and at best two steps backwards.

Is this as a result of governmental decisions or the will of the people, largely it is a combination of both, neither of the parties can be fully blamed. The legendary quote of Joseph de Maistre, echoes strongly here and feels very true: “Every country has the government it deserves.” The Poles, Hungarians, Estonians, Lithuanians etc, after the 90s put all their efforts in joining the EU, and in the process “eradicated” the communist roots in place, by electing new leaders with no ties to the previous systems. While in the WB, the same faces have remained in power for now more than 20 years, by the will of the people, and the new faces that come up, take the shape of the old ones. The critics might neglect this element by saying that these countries are flawed democracies, but democracies nonetheless they are. Are the citizens of WB states truly pro EU, maybe yes, but not so much. The EU is not their savior, even though they make it to seem so, if it was, they would have joined their forces and will, and the integration would have been finished by now. If the bad leaders in place are the problem, they could have replaced them (however challenging that might seem).

We often might have heard the phrase, keep your priorities straight. EU integration has been there since the beginning, a top priority, but never the desire to fully complete the process has been strong enough. Hence, the just mentioned statement that the EU integration has been always a top priority, doesn't seem so believable. It is real in paper mostly (not to neglect the good work that has been done, though not sufficient). This should not demoralize our already depressed societies; we never had straight priorities in our policies. Not because the programs of the parties are so different, or more precise their governing, but because and using a very classical philosophical term, the people of the WB don't know what they want (except getting rich quickly maybe).

Hence let us see under a critical light, if we want the EU, or let us make it desirable or non-desirable to us. Firstly, we can make a claim to be an EU member, not just based on geographical elements, but on robust historical ties primarily. Secondly, will a future under the EU mean more economical development for the WB countries, yes, and no? Yes, because we have seen economical rise in the countries that have joined the EU already, but a careful study needs to be applied here, because EU's economical policies are not exclusive to the EU, other non-EU states in Europe have managed to build up strong economies, such as Norway and Switzerland under the right supervision. In this category another question needs to be made, do we want to join the Eurozone as well in the future, in my humble opinion of a non-economical expert, no. A country's economy functions better under its own currency.

Focusing on individual benefits, the EU has a lot going for it. Its regulations are some of the best in the world, from products quality to security of one's privacy online. Students get a lot

of benefits through different programs and fee cuts on higher education institutions if they are EU citizens and what I am really positive towards as an idea, though for some it may be considered something valueless, is being an European. By all indicators I am an European, and especially proud of being one, but if you are an “EU European”, that has a kind prestige around it, from a WB perspective. This because in my belief, disappointed from being an Albanian, Serb, Kosovar, Bosnian, Northern Macedonian or Montenegrin, the people of the WB seek a new identity, not in the sense that they aren't proud of what they are in a cultural aspect, but wanting something larger than them, something better. Putting it an adequate manner, they want to have the rights, benefits, opportunities and chances that a German has.

Additionally, and very crucial, the EU is famed for being a project of peace. The pages of history are filled with wars between the great and small European powers; almost all of the most destructive wars in the history of mankind have had their origin in the old continent. What has been achieved, a period of more than 70 years of relative peace in Europe, is something to truly be applauded. Especially from the viewpoint of WB states, who still have fresh history of conflict and bloodshed? The problems that the French and the Germans had in 1946, through common will for a better future, they managed to put aside, as should the WB countries do.

For all the goods, the process of joining the EU has and brings, we should opt to not rush in our efforts in being part of the organization. The very idea that the doors of the EU will be our salvation, is profoundly wrong, either inside or outside the EU, the one who will do the work to raise and develop our states to a desired lever, are us. The EU is just a model of development, a good model to be true, but there are other options out there that we might consider.

I am not implying that we should totally disregard the integration process. Many of the EU suggestion are constructive ones, that if applied correctly could harvest great benefits for the countries of the WB, but I believe the people of the WB know their countries better than the EU does. What has worked for France, Italy, Germany, does not mean that it will necessarily work for Serbia, Albania or Northern Macedonia. We can explore different paths of development that different countries have used, such as Singapore, Vietnam, Thailand etc., and by adapting them to our needs and conditions we can reach even greater heights from those we think we can. Additionally, we should not forget, that EU is not the World; it is not our only life supply line.

If the people and the countries of the WB have decided that their future is in the EU, then so be it. Yet before joining the group, they should be prepared, in order to not enter as beggars, but as equals. As equals, in the quality of their societies and the level of investment they do on their people, to unleash their potentials. We have much to learn, but let us work so that one-day, we might have something to teach as well. In the words of the great Albert Pike: *“What we have done for ourselves alone dies with us; what we have done for others and the world remains and is immortal.”*

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