



# **THE ENLARGEMENT OF THE EU: A NEW APPROACH AND PERSPECTIVE FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS**

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## **THE ENLARGEMENT OF THE EU: A NEW APPROACH AND PERSPECTIVE FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS**

**The EU's enlargement policy aims to unite European countries in a common political and economic project. It is a geostrategic investment in a stable, strong and united Europe, based on common values and offering democratic governance and respect for fundamental rights.**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The European Union needs an efficient and consistent common foreign and security policy. Such a policy strengthens the Union's geopolitical position as a global factor premised on the full respect for international law, human rights, environmental care, and the protection and promotion of multilateral relations as the best way to address global challenges. This can only be achieved by means of unity, cooperation, decisiveness, reliability, and proactive initiatives.

A stronger European foreign policy should include, in addition to the EU traditional "soft power", enhanced defence capabilities. The new geopolitical global realities and the emerging new challenges require that we ensure a more active cooperation in the area of defence, an evaluation of the EU-NATO relations, an efficient sanctions policy, and improved cooperation in the fight against terrorism.

### **THE EU ENLARGEMENT POLICY**

The EU enlargement policy aims to unite the EU Member States in a common political and economic project. It also contributes to strengthening the EU's presence on the global scene. This is a geostrategic investment in our pursuit of a stable, strong and united Europe which is based on common values, as well as democratic governance and respect for fundamental rights. The reliable perspective for accession is the driving force of integration, security, prosperity, and social well-being. It is crucial for

promoting reconciliation and stability.

Being one of EU's most successful foreign policy instruments, enlargement plays a key role. This also refers to the Western Balkan countries in terms of their prospects for future EU membership. In his 2017 State of the Union Address, the President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker once again reaffirmed the European future for the Western Balkan countries:


**"If we want more stability in our neighbourhood, then we must also maintain a credible enlargement perspective for the Western Balkans. It is clear that there will be no further enlargement during the mandate of this Commission and this Parliament. No candidate is ready. But thereafter the European Union will be greater than 27 in number. Accession candidates must give the rule of law, justice and fundamental rights utmost priority in the negotiations."**

If we take a look at the map of Europe, we can see that the Western Balkan region is situated right at the geographic and cultural heart of the continent. This is a major prerequisite for linking the region's future to its integration in the EU. On the other hand, if the region is overlooked by the Union, external forces might take advantage of the opportunity to expand their areas of economic influence to encompass Europe's geographic centre, which will enable them to destabilise the region. It is for this reason that European prosperity and security are closely linked to the process of integration and the advancement of peace, democracy, the respect for human rights and the rule of law in the Western Balkans and their future in a stronger and reformed European Union.

On 1 July 2013 Croatia was the first of the seven Western Balkan countries to accede to the EU, and at present Montenegro, Serbia, North Macedonia, and Albania have the status of candidate countries. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are potential candidate countries.

After Croatia's accession, however, the enlargement process has been slow due to internal issues within the EU which have created a breeding ground for emerging populism and nationalism. The debt crisis in the Eurozone, weak economic growth, the migration wave, and Brexit have overshadowed enlargement on the agenda.

<sup>1</sup> European Commission (2018), „A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans“, Communication, COM(2018) 65



This has resulted in substantial difficulties in the progress of reforms in the context of enlargement, thus making the process slow and inefficient. EU enlargement policy is faced with chronic problems inherent to the Western Balkan region which relate to challenges to the rule of law, corruption, weak democratic institutions, disinformation campaigns, and anti-EU attitudes in politics and among the citizens

At the summits held in Thessaloniki in 2003 , Sofia in 2018 , and Zagreb in 2020 , the EU unanimously confirmed its categorical support for the EU perspective of the Western Balkans. The Western Balkan partners once again reiterated their commitment to the EU as their strategic choice. The reliability of these efforts depends on providing the public with clear information. The EU is determined to consolidate and enhance its commitment at all levels in support of the region's political, economic and social transformation, including by building on the substantial progress achieved by the Western Balkan partners in terms of the rule of law and social and economic reforms. The EU supports the Western Balkan partners' commitment to continue and to foster good neighbourly relations, regional stability, and mutual cooperation.

In early 2020, the new European Commission launched a revised enlargement methodology. This methodology brings to the fore the need to boost the efficiency of the accession process. It encourages taking serious actions to tackle the challenges ensuing from the broader picture of setbacks in democracy across the region, and the divided public opinion in the EU on the enlargement process.

The occurrence of some neoliberal and populist practices within the EU have nourished discontent with further enlargement and have raised issues regarding the sustainability of the reforms implemented by the candidate countries prior to their accession to the EU. In spite of the need for internal reforms within the EU itself, there is no reason for these reforms not to take place in parallel with the integration of the Western Balkan countries. Reforming the EU should evolve hand-in-hand with the enlargement process, as they are not mutually exclusive. This is a successful strategy which was already tested in 2002 when the candidate countries from Eastern Europe were admitted into the consultation process related to the Convention of the Future of Europe. A similar proposal was also made by the President of the European Commission Ursula von der

<sup>2</sup>European Commission (21 June 2003), "Eu- Western Balkans Summit Thessaloniki" , Declaration, C/03/163

<sup>3</sup>European Commission (17 May 2018), "Eu- Western Balkans Summit Sofia" , Declaration

<sup>4</sup>European Commission (6 May 2020), "Eu- Western Balkans Summit Zagreb" , Declaration

<sup>5</sup>European Commission (2020), "A more credible, dynamic, predictable and political EU accession process – Commission lays out its proposals"

Leyen at the 2020 EU – Western Balkans Summit in Zagreb. In her speech she clearly stated that the Western Balkan region remains a main priority for the EU, and belongs to it. As proof of this and as a sign of solidarity, the countries from the region were invited to be part of the EU's joint procurement for medical equipment and supplies in the context of tackling the COVID-19 crisis. The invitation to the Western Balkan countries to take part in the discussions on the EU's future conveys an extremely important message to the citizens of the region, and demonstrates that they have been accepted and equally treated by their European partners. Hence, this will disarm the anti-EU forces, the lack of trust in the EU being their strongest argument.

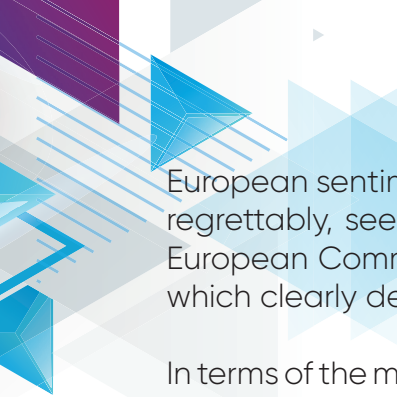
The EU and its Western Balkan partners share the goal for a peaceful, strong, stable, and united Europe based on our historic, cultural and geographic ties and mutual interests in the areas of security and economy. The EU is determined to further foster its commitment at all levels in support of the political, economic and social transformation of the region. The EU welcomes the commitment of the Western Balkan partners to uphold the European values and principles and ensure a comprehensive and proactive implementation of the necessary reforms. The allocation of increased EU assistance will be contingent on achieving visible progress in the areas of the rule of law and social and economic reforms, as well as on the respect for EU's values, principles and standards by the Western Balkan partners.

## **AN EU "SOFT POWER"**

The European perspective for the region is a powerful driving force for reforms therein. The general public opinion in the Western Balkan countries regarding the EU is very positive, and most citizens approve of the accession of their countries to the Union. The main reason for this relates to the EU's ability to ensure the transformation of the states and their societies. This capacity for change is of paramount importance in the area of the rule of law. The respect for its fundamental principles and values in the process of enlargement towards the Western Balkans is a prerequisite for the EU to be regarded as a guarantor of legality, and, therefore, as the main driver of change on the way to a more equitable society. This, in return, will contribute to a pro-

<sup>6</sup>European Parliament, "The Treaty of Nice and the Convention on the Future of Europe"

<sup>7</sup>European Commission (2020), Statement by President von der Leyen at the joint press conference with President Michel and Andrej Plenković, Prime Minister of Croatia, following the EU-Western Balkans Zagreb Summit, Statement



European sentiment amongst the societies in the Western Balkans. A sentiment which, regrettably, seems to have been fading recently. The 2019 Communication from the European Commission on EU Enlargement Policies<sup>8</sup> mentions the rule of law 24 times, which clearly demonstrates that it is the main criterion for EU accession.

In terms of the major challenges facing the Western Balkans, the above Communication refers to the merging of powers, links between the authorities and criminal groups, interweaving of public and private interests, and corruption at all levels of governance and public administration. The reality is that the Strategy of the European Commission for the Western Balkans of February 2018<sup>9</sup> recognizes that the countries in the region have not yet undertaken the necessary large-scale reforms aimed at tackling the above-mentioned challenges. The reports of the European Commission, in particular those regarding the countries with the greatest progress in the accession process – Serbia and Montenegro – reveal concern with regard to the rule of law and the freedom of mass media in the two countries. European institutions still supported to provide specific prices that allow governments to ignore criticism. It is for this reason that liberal and pro-European organizations from the Western Balkans accuse the EU to ignore the reality behind an internal stability for those governments whose democratic nature is questionable as long as the latter ensure sufficient stability.

According to these organisations<sup>10</sup>, such a policy does not allow the candidate countries to tackle their deeply rooted problems, and to unleash their full potential as functioning democracies. As a result of this, groups of young and well-educated people are forced to leave their homeland in search of a better and more equitable life for themselves and their families, which further weakens the public capacity for reforms.

In view of the above, the European Union should reconsider its role in terms of the Westerns Balkans, and, respectively, ensure a radical change in its foreign policy in respect of this region.

<sup>8</sup>European Commission (2018), "2019 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy", Communication, COM(2019) 260

<sup>9</sup>European Commission (2018), "Strategy for the Western Balkans", Press release

<sup>10</sup>European Commission (2019), "Key findings of the 2019 Report on Montenegro"



## POLITICS AND CITIZENS

Western Balkan leaders are expected to ensure the strict observance and application of the fundamental values, the principles of democracy and the rule of law. The public transformation and the efficient implementation of reforms are contingent on these premises. The EU institutions, in return, should put in place mechanisms which will be instrumental in detecting cases where the power and the media are taken over, and share these mechanisms with the public and the competent authorities so that the latter take specific measures to curtail these phenomena.

The EU is well aware of the ongoing geopolitical significance of enlargement for its foreign policy. The European path should remain open to all Western Balkan countries, provided that the latter meet the relevant criteria.

It is important to consider the fact that EU's popularity and the belief that the future of the Western Balkans and the European Union are converging has been in decline. It is well known that politics does not allow for any vacuum. Whenever a rising power detects a vacant space, it will inevitably attempt to fill it in. This has contributed to the growing influence of global powers in the region. While this process has not been overlooked by the EU, serious account needs to be taken of it.

The societies in the Western Balkans are exposed on a daily basis to disinformation campaigns whose sole aim is to diminish the support towards the EU at the expense of other geopolitical forces with interests vested in and outside the region. These geopolitical forces pursue misleading the citizens with respect to the real value of the trade in goods with the EU and the financial support received from the EU. Eurostat statistics show that the EU is the largest and the most important trade partner of the Western Balkan countries. As of today, the trade with the EU accounts for over 50% of the overall import and export balance of the Western Balkan countries. The absolute value of the trade in goods has been rising each year since 2009.

<sup>11</sup>European Commission (2019), "Key findings of the 2019 Report on Serbia"

<sup>12</sup>Recommendations for the European Union, "Integrating the Western Balkans: Completing Future Europe"

<sup>13</sup>Recommendations for the European Union, "Integrating the Western Balkans: Completing Future Europe"



## EU ACCESSION AND RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

With a view to ensuring tangible benefits for citizens of the candidate countries and EU citizens, a review and a reform of the accession negotiation process have been undertaken. The review was ready for the EU-Westerns Balkans Zagreb Summit , and will be at the basis of the negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania. The enlargement process still sets the requirement to meet the three benchmarks: completion of the necessary reforms in the sphere of the rule of law; economic and social development; and improved regional cooperation.

In addition to being rather cumbersome, the previous negotiation framework was also too bureaucratic. Further steps and conditions were introduced following the EU eastward enlargement in 2004 and 2007. Moreover, acquiring candidate country status did not automatically trigger the opening of a negotiation process. This is why the negotiations were protracted, which had a detrimental impact on the momentum gained in the reform process, thus undermining the pro-European forces in the region. Before being reformed, the negotiation process would take about four full terms of office (4 years each) of a government.

Another reason for the inert pace of the negotiation process prior to the reform was the existence of at least 31 negotiation chapters which could be vetoed by any EU Member State. There was no requirement for the reasons behind the veto to be relevant to that specific negotiation chapter. Populist parties in the Member States benefited from the existence of this option and made political capital at home, thus undermining the future of united Europe and the numerous hours of work done by those dedicating their time and efforts to reform. . Therefore, this particular option was eliminated with the introduction of the qualified majority voting in the EU Council on matters pertaining to the enlargement process.


The stated drawbacks which made the process cumbersome and hindered the successful enlargement of the EU were the reason behind its reform. At present the new methodology for EU enlargement , in combination with some improvements in the

<sup>14</sup>Recommendations for the European Union, "Integrating the Western Balkans: Completing Future Europe"

existing accession instruments, is most likely to contribute to a successful resolution in the short run of the negotiations between the EU, and, respectively, Serbia and Montenegro. The revised approach to opening and conducting the negotiations substantially facilitates the process and reverses the long-standing trend for the negotiation process to become increasingly complicated and fragmented over time. The improved methodology of the negotiation process based on the introduction of the so-called roadmaps is conducive to the expeditious opening of new negotiation chapters. Hence the majority of the reforms are carried out after a certain chapter has been opened, which is of help to the pro-European actors in the Western Balkans. This change in the negotiation process aims to offer some enthusiasm to the candidate countries by demonstrating to them that the accession option is still on the agenda. The system for review over candidate countries has also been changed. The time limit for receiving a candidate status, opening negotiations and completing the negotiation process and meeting the EU standards is now subject to an agreement between the EU and the Western Balkan countries. If the government of the candidate country fails to carry out the necessary reforms, the EU is not obliged to continue the negotiations. This new specific characteristic of the negotiation process helps the candidate countries maintain the momentum and puts their governments under additional pressure to carry out the required reforms.

The EU, in return, has further optimised the accession process by making efforts to improve its own mechanisms for evaluating the reforms. For example, the process of evaluating the outcomes from a specific negotiation chapter shall be completed within a period of up to six months from the closing thereof. In the past, this process would take an average of one year and a half or even longer.

Candidate countries will be encouraged at each successful step in the negotiation process. This will be done by means of specific financial and institutional incentives envisaged in the EU enlargement strategy. By way of example, a candidate country may be allowed to participate in the European Council on migration or foreign affairs. After reviewing the updated progress report of the European Commission of 2 March 2020 on the Republic of North Macedonia and Albania, the Council welcomed the fact that the two countries had embarked on serious reforms, and had met the conditions



set therein in June 2018 in terms of opening the accession negotiations. In the context of the progress achieved in implementing the reforms, the Council made a decision to start accession negotiations with the Republic of North Macedonia and the Republic of Albania.

The citizens and the societies in the candidate countries need to be more closely linked to the accession process and be able to feel the benefits thereof. In view of this, the EU should support and encourage, first and foremost, the pro-European and pro-democratic segments of the society, views and opinions. The European Commission should ensure that each action taken is accompanied by a comprehensive dialogue with the civil society organisations, the academic community, and young people. This dialogue should be ongoing from the early stage of decision-making until the stage of implementation and evaluation. There has to be a special focus on the support for or the provision of funds to existing local anti-European governance structures or local structures with a questionable democratic image. This would be instrumental in strengthening the promotion of EU values, the rule of law, the fight against corruption, and the building of strong and efficient democratic institutions as a basis for the successful EU accession. The candidate countries have to put in place a stable framework for the prevention of corruption. Strong and independent institutions are crucial in preventing and tackling corruption. The specialised prosecution structures and anti-corruption bodies have to be substantially strengthened.

## **THE ROLE OF EU FUNDS**

Consistent actions towards the fully-fledged EU membership should run in parallel with gradual access to EU programmes and the provisions of financing from the EU structural funds; the next Multiannual Financial Framework should provide for a more progressive approach to the candidate countries. Sufficient resources should be allocated through the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance in order to support an efficient enlargement policy.

The existing funds for integration currently available to the Western Balkan countries

<sup>15</sup>European Parliament, Initial Analysis of the treaty of Amsterdam

<sup>16</sup>Eurostat, Western Balkans-EU – international trade in goods statistics

<sup>17</sup>European Commission, (2020), Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans, Communication

are rather small compared to the ones available to the Member States. Even the Central and Eastern European states benefited from larger financial assistance during their accession process. As of today, the Western Balkan countries are underdeveloped in economic terms compared to the EU Member States. The gross domestic product per capita in the Western Balkans stands at only half of the GDP per capita in the EU Eastern European Member States. In addition, in the period 2005–2015 the Western Balkan countries had a € 94 billion deficit in their trade balance with the EU, which contributed to higher foreign debt. If the Western Balkan states maintain their current pace of development, it will take them almost half a century to catch up with the EU average living standard.

It is for these reasons, that the next 2021–2027 Multiannual Financial Framework of the EU should provide for an increased amount of financing for the candidate countries. The goal should be that the funds accessible to the Western Balkan countries account for 2% of their GDP in the year of accession. At present these funds range between 0.27% of the GDP for Bosnia and Herzegovina and 1.48% for Kosovo.

The source of this substantial increase will be the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA III), which is part of the Multiannual Financial Framework. Access to this instrument is conditional on the implementation of the Copenhagen criteria in the area of the rule of law, the fundamental human rights, the economy, and the strengthening of democratic institutions. The purpose of IPA III is assisting the candidate countries with implementing the necessary reforms, and preparing them in relation to the rights and obligations ensuing from their future membership. As of today, the amount envisaged for the candidate countries from the Western Balkans and Turkey for the period 2021–2027 stands at € 14.5 billion.

Another aim of IPA III is being operational in line with the new European Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument which pledges to ensure a radical transformation of how the EU finances its foreign affairs operations. It combines 10 existing regulators with the aim to make them more efficient. The said European Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument is the main EU mechanism for eradicating poverty and fostering development, prosperity, peace



and stability outside the Union's borders.

It consists of three pillars. The main one is the geographic pillar under which € 68 billion has been made available for the purpose of improving EU's dialogue and relationships with third countries. 22 billion out of the total of € 68 billion is the earmarked amount for the Western Balkan region. The funds of this Instrument will be used to promote policy interaction, as well as the social and economic development of the countries in the region.

Enhanced access to structural funds would allow the candidate countries to benefit from better conditions in global security markets, which will further lower the risk of them approaching third countries for financing.

Furthermore, the EU can assist the Western Balkan countries by means of a horizontal arrangement for the funds, which will improve their efficiency.

The increase in the allocations from the cohesion funds prior to a country's accession should be at the expense of a proportional reduction in the allocations from the structural funds following the country's accession.

Another instrument to encourage successful reforms in the area of the rule of law and other important areas is linking performance to a system of financial incentives or sanctions. This would further encourage the candidate countries to undertake the necessary reforms.

In addition to financial support by means of access to the funds, the EU could also help the Western Balkan countries in economic terms by providing them with access to the single market before their official EU membership, and thus eliminating the trade barriers.

## **THE UPCOMING FIVE YEARS (2019-2024) - THE TRANSITION TO GREEN ENERGY AND A NEW DIGITAL WORLD**

<sup>18</sup>European Commission, (2020), Commission reports on progress made by Albania and North Macedonia, Press release

<sup>19</sup>Civil Society Forum of the Western Balkans, Twelve Proposals for EU Enlargement from the Western Balkans, Policy Brief 02/19

<sup>20</sup>Civil Society Forum of the Western Balkans, Twelve Proposals for EU Enlargement from the Western Balkans, Policy Brief 02/19

The upcoming five years (2019–2024) open up an opportunity for Europe to be more ambitious at the regional level in order to become a global leader. Europe should play a key role in the transition to green energy and a new digital world. This can be achieved only by uniting people and upgrading our social and market economy in line with our current new ambitions.

The opening and closing of chapters should be based on clear benchmarks and conditions, while the rule of law and the fundamental human rights remain priorities throughout the process. The reason is that EU accession requires a strong commitment to shared values. All the steps within the process should be reversible in cases of failure to meet commitments or the occurrence of substantial political changes in the candidate countries. In the event of similar developments, the EU reserves the right to revert to previous negotiation stages. The rule of law should be a horizontal element throughout the negotiation process. A focus is also needed on the judgments delivered by international tribunals – a priority identified at the EU–Western Balkans Zagreb Summit in 2003.

Climate change and environmental protection are crucial for the existence of our continent and the world. In order to address these challenges, the EU needs a new growth strategy ensuring the Union's transformation towards a modern, efficient and competitive economy. The biggest challenge and opportunity of our time is Europe becoming the first climate-neutral continent worldwide. This requires decisive actions and an up-date of the industrial policy. The latter will include the first ever EU legal act in which climate neutrality will be set out as a goal by 2050. At present, the goal is a reduction by 40% of carbon emissions by 2030. However, we must be more ambitious. Climate change, biological diversity, deforestation and soil degradation go hand in hand. A change is needed in terms of the way in which people produce, consume and trade. A biodiversity strategy 2030 will be launched within the framework of the EU Green Deal.

The aim of EU's strategy in the area of digital technologies is for this transformation to benefit the people and enterprises and to also facilitate achieving the climate-neutral goal by 2050. This is why the EU's strategies for artificial intelligence and personal data

<sup>21</sup>European Council, Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA III): Council agrees its position, Press Release

<sup>22</sup>European Commission, Countries and regions ,Western Balkans





protection focus on encouraging enterprises to use the new technologies and develop new ones, while ensuring, in parallel, that citizens trust these technologies.

Digital technologies, in particular artificial intelligence, are transforming the world at an unprecedented pace. They have changed the way we communicate, live and work. The internet connects the world in a new way. Huge and constantly growing volumes of data are being gathered. Europe is already setting the standards in the area of telecommunications. It is time for another success story – developing common standards for 5G networks. While it may be too late to set up new technology giants, it is not too late to attain technological sovereignty in some crucial areas of technology. The European approach will be based on three main pillars with a view to ensuring that Europe benefits from this opportunity and empowers its citizens, enterprises and governments to have control over digital transformation. Specific standards for this new generation of technologies will be designed in parallel, and these standards will become the global norm. The EU's strategy in the area of digital technologies will benefit the European citizens, enterprises, and the environment.

## **GUIDELINES OF THE CANDIDATE COUNTRIES FOR EU MEMBERS**

Involving the candidate countries in these sectoral policies at an early stage is crucial to their integration in the EU prior to their de facto membership. An important focus is needed on including the region in the EU's climate-related ambitions in conformity with the Paris Agreement, promoting the Green Deal for the Western Balkans, and on boosting the digital economy and strengthening connectivity in all its dimensions: transport, energy, digitalization and contacts among people, including tourism and culture.

The difficulties of the bureaucratic procedure for the accession of the candidate countries is the main argument of the countries that are skeptical about the enlargement of the EU enlargement. This is why the political class in the candidate countries should be well informed about the process and the outcomes from the reforms implemented. A useful initiative in this respect would be setting up an annual meeting, which will



allow the individual representatives of the Member States to receive information and take part in discussions with their counterparts from the Western Balkan candidate countries.

## **COMMUNICATION AND CONSISTENCY**

The strategic communication with regard to the region should be enhanced and doubled by means of intensified communication towards the European citizens who also need to have better knowledge about the enlargement process and the benefits of an enlarging EU.

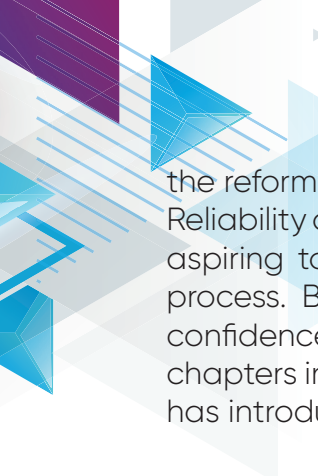
Prejudices, the lack of information and misinformation should be discouraged by providing information which will improve the public opinion in the Member States and candidate countries. In the context of the integration of the Western Balkans, the EU institutions should initiate a broad communication programme whereby our shared history, culture, values and vision for the future of united Europe will be promoted.

The enlargement process continues to be of mutual interest and benefit to both the EU and the acceding countries. A determined and committed European Commission should play a pivotal role in this process. The systemic reforms required for the accession to the EU can be successfully implemented only with broad support of the citizens and commitment at the local level with respect to accession-related institutional and economic reforms which are strongly supported by means of the ongoing participation of the EU institutions.

The political forces of the Western Balkans must play dedicated and constant role in the process. They must contribute to an improved public opinion on the reforms and a revived regional cooperation needed for the EU accession of the candidate countries. A similar large-scale operation requires mobilizing all social resources, including national parliaments, media, academic institutions, think-thanks, and other public organisations. The image of EU accession as a desirable objective due to the benefits of fully-fledged membership for citizens and societies should be an boost in

<sup>23</sup>European Commission (21 June 2003), "Eu- Western Balkans Summit Thessaloniki" , Declaration, C/03/163

<sup>24</sup>European Commission,(21 June 2003), EU-Western Balkans Summit Thessaloniki, Press Release, C/03/163



the reform process and an instrument for ongoing democratic development. Reliability and consistency in applying these principles both by the EU and the countries aspiring to become Member States are crucial to the success of the enlargement process. Both parties to the process must keep their promises in order to ensure confidence and reliability. The EU has pledged to opening and closing the negotiation chapters in the shortest possible period, provided that the relevant candidate country has introduced all the necessary reforms.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The appointment of a Special Envoy for the Western Balkans is of paramount importance. This Envoy will play a double role, and will work under the guidance of the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the EU Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy by focusing their efforts on the resolution of protracted conflicts in the region. Bilateral disagreements are the main barrier to the successful EU accession of the Western Balkan countries. They include divergences both between Western Balkan candidate countries and between a candidate country and an EU Member State. Regrettably, we have already witnessed potential negative consequences from such disagreements in regard to the negotiation process of a candidate country.

The EU should take more serious diplomatic measures with the aim to encourage the South-Eastern European states to smooth their relations. A similar foreign policy would foster the attitudes of reliability and trust in the EU not only in the Western Balkan region but also on a global scale. A positive example set by the EU institutions in terms of promoting good neighbourly relations in the region is the decision made by the European Investment Bank to assist with the construction of the "Peace Highway" connecting Nish (Serbia) and Pristina (Kosovo).

The EU should increase its ongoing and targeted financial, institutional support and assistance for the development of the countries in the region through the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA III) which will soon become operational; the Commission

<sup>25</sup> Political Guidelines, next Commission, An alliance with bigger ambitions(2019-2024)

should improve its cooperation with other IFM, in particular the World Bank, in order to align the efforts and avoid double funding.


The EU needs to make additional efforts to boost systemic development and enhance the institutional and administrative capacity of the public sector in the relevant countries. Increased funding for candidate countries should be coupled with strengthened administrative and legislative capacity in these countries, which will ensure the success of the process.

The EU strongly supports the inclusion of regional educational systems, NGOs and SMEs in the programmes Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020, and calls for setting up a permanent platform for NGO cooperation in the region; the IPA III funding for the region should be in line with the objectives of the EU's Green Deal; increased support for education, in particular launching a pilot project for mobility in the area of vocational education and training; doubling the funding under the Erasmus+ programme for the region, including the establishment of a "Laboratory for the Youth of the Western Balkans" in 2018 which will ensure a platform for innovative policy-making aimed at young people's needs, and will tackle brain drain.

Joint efforts to promote the region in the Member States should be stepped up, which will help counter negative stereotypes and ensure better visibility for EU programmes in the Western Balkans. When the whole region of the Western Balkans will have achieved a transformation allowing its accession to the EU, the vacant segment on the map between Greece and Bulgaria and the remaining part of the Union will be filled in.

- **WESTERN BALKANS: HOME OF HISTORY AND CULTURE**

The Western Balkans are home to a rich history and culture, and people who have lived through numerous hardships, including ethnic conflicts. The states in the region have suffered bloody horrors that European citizens could hardly imagine occurring in the second half of the 20th century. The enhanced regional cooperation and connectivity in both physical and digital terms should be a key focus. The EU should perceive the Western Balkan countries as a part of the Union, and integrate them in



its internal, infrastructural and regional strategies such as the Energy Union and the EU Industrial Policy. The EU Commissioner for Enlargement shares the belief that the EU should provide the region with an economic development plan in order to speed up its growth.

- **COOPERATION AND INVESTMENTS**

Such a plan should have as a starting point the most essential areas: improved connectivity, railway transport, and energy. Its goals, however, must be ambitious enough. This is why the EU should be prepared to provide the region with increased financial investments and expertise for the development of the educational system and high technologies, which will be an incentive for young people to remain and work for the development of their homeland.

The citizens of the EU and the region share a common heritage and history, as well as a future defined by common opportunities and challenges. The EU's strong commitment to the region has a long history. The EU has supported the future of the region as an inseparable part of the EU since the EU Council in Thessaloniki in 2003.

- **RELIABLE ACCESSION FOR PROSPERITY**

A secure, merit-based prospect of EU membership for the Western Balkans is entirely in the interest of the EU in terms of the economy and politics, and security. Furthermore, it is a geostrategic investment in a stable, strong and united Europe based on common values. This prospect is a powerful tool to promote democracy, the rule of law and the respect for human rights. A reliable accession prospect is the main driving force for transformation in the region, which fosters collective integration, security, prosperity, and social well-being. It is of paramount importance for strengthening the process of reconciliation and stability.

Daily life in the Western Balkans should gradually be catching up with life within the European Union. The citizens want to live in states with prosperity and justice in which the rule of law is strong and corruption has been eradicated.

- **A MATTER OF CHOICE**

Last but not least, EU accession is a matter of choice. What is needed is political and public consensus, and the support of people's hearts and minds.

The European perspective for the Western Balkans is clear and unambiguous, and the conditions and criteria for EU membership are well defined. The EU will provide unprecedented support for this purpose. The candidate countries must make further efforts and do a lot of work in order to be able to meet these criteria. Governments must ensure more inclusive reform processes which will unite all stakeholders and the society as a whole. What matters most is that leaders in the region have no doubts as to their strategic orientation and commitment. It is the leaders that should assume the responsibility to make this historic opportunity a reality. The EU should considerably strengthen its support for the process of transformation in the Western Balkans.

- **A PEACEFUL, UNITED EUROPE**

The EU and their partners from the Western Balkans share the goal for a peaceful, strong, stable and united Europe, based on our historic, cultural and geographic ties, and mutual interests in the area of politics, security and economy. The EU has supported the European prospects for the Balkans for a long time. The future of the region as an inseparable part of the EU is in the EU's interest in political and economic terms, as well as in security terms. The EU's enlargement policy is an inseparable part of the broader strategy for strengthening the Union by 2025.

The EU is determined to further reinforce its commitment at all levels in support of the political, economic and social transformation of the region, and welcomes the commitment of the Western Balkan partners to uphold the European values and principles, and to ensure a comprehensive and proactive implementation of the necessary reforms. The increased assistance from the EU will be linked to the achievement of a tangible progress in terms of the rule of law and the social and economic reforms, as well as the respect for EU values, rules and standards by the Western Balkan partners.

<sup>27</sup>Political Guidelines, next Commission, An alliance with bigger ambitions(2019-2024)

<sup>27</sup>European Commission, EU-Western Balkans summit: improving connectivity and security in the region, Press Release

