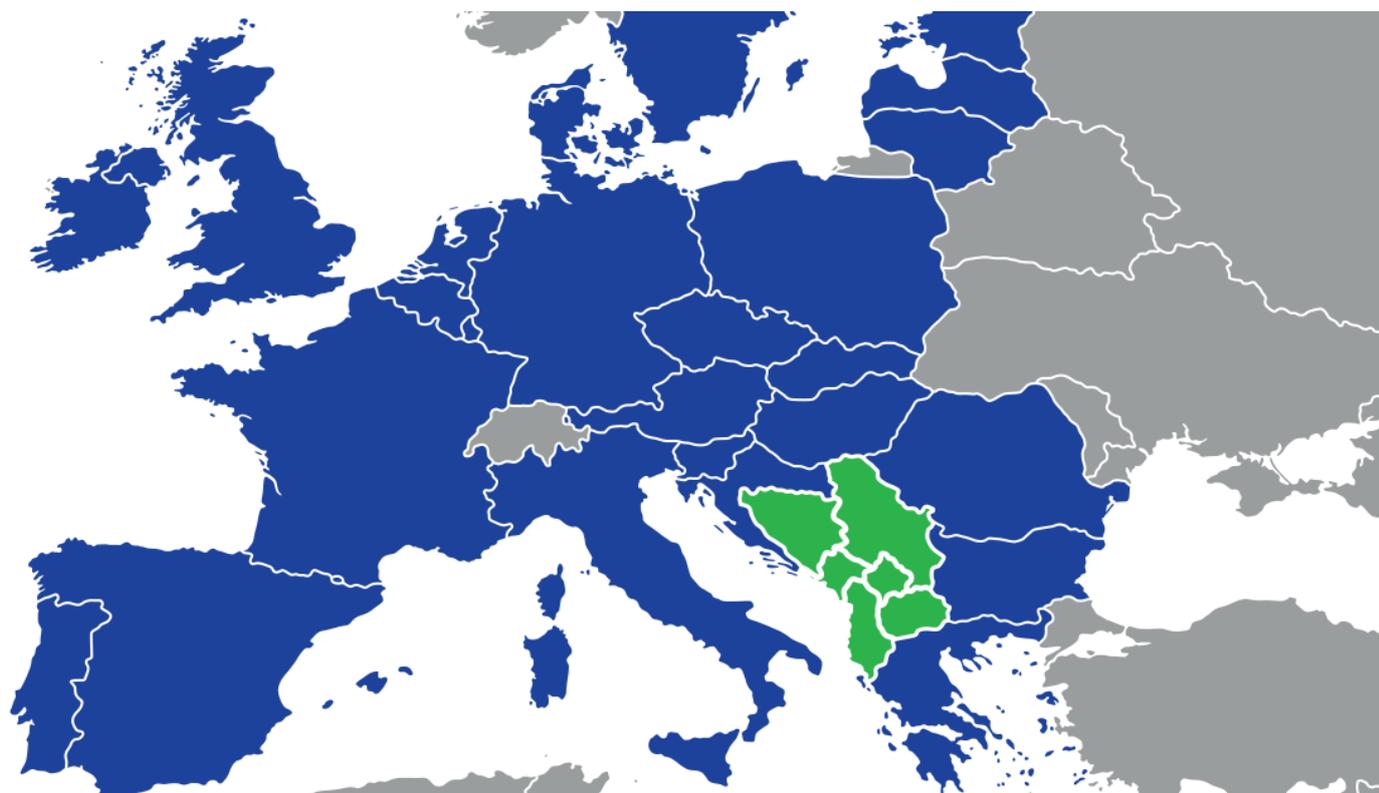


# EASTERN MONITOR

## Enlargement to the Western Balkans: Finally Ready to Commit?

Jana Juzová

- **The release of the European Commission's "Enlargement Strategy" represents an attempt by the EU to demonstrate its commitment to the region's future inside the EU and to motivate Western Balkan leaders to accelerate the adoption and implementation of the necessary reforms.**
- **The Strategy represents a breaking point after a decade of enlargement fatigue because it offers, for the first time, a clear date for possible accession of the "frontrunners". However, it fails to address some of the most problematic obstacles the enlargement to the Western Balkans currently faces.**



## Western Balkans: Back on the EU's agenda

On 6<sup>th</sup> February 2018, the European Commission released a key document for the EU's enlargement policy, and especially for the Western Balkan countries, titled "A credible enlargement perspective for an enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans".<sup>1</sup> The so-called "Enlargement Strategy", stating that 'the EU's enlargement policy is part and parcel of the larger strategy to strengthen the Union by 2025', represents a sign of EU's renewed commitment to further enlargement. As it focuses specifically on the Western Balkans, the Strategy introduces achievable goals for each of the countries by 2025 – accession, opening accession negotiations or obtaining the candidate status – and includes a number of initiatives providing further and intensified support by the EU to the Western Balkan countries on their European path. While the Strategy has the potential to finally set the countries on the right path towards the EU accession, it suffers from several shortcomings which threaten its final effect, and introduces controversial aspects which could lead to problems further in the process.

The Strategy is in line with the previous engagement of the EU in the region. The Thessaloniki Summit in 2003 spelled out a clear European perspective for the Western Balkan countries, and still today remains a reason of optimism for local leaders and populations. The outcomes of the Summit then arguably stimulated the region's leaders to strengthen their efforts in the adoption and implementation of the required reforms, bringing them closer to the EU. Populations in the region welcomed this signal as it gave it a much needed hope and motivation to go through the difficult and sometimes even painful reform process with a clear perspective of a European future.

However, since then the progress has been only very slow and EU's devotion to enlargement has withered. Now, the Strategy once again confirms that the EU counts on the accession of the Western Balkan countries to the EU in the future, this time with a clear date for possible accession of

the frontrunners. The document could possibly represent a breaking point for the EU's enlargement policy and its engagement in the Western Balkans. In the last years, the EU was busy dealing with its own various crises and internal issues and the enlargement agenda has been pushed aside for a long time. For example, the White Paper on the Future of Europe<sup>2</sup> released just a year ago by the European Commission did not mention enlargement at all. This sidelining of the enlargement agenda and ambiguity regarding the prospects of the candidate countries for actual accession also led to more skepticism among the public in the Western Balkans, with a significant number of people losing hope in their countries' EU membership perspective.<sup>3</sup> After years of neglect, the Strategy gave the Western Balkan countries a reassurance that the EU counts on their future membership and this time even offered a tangible date to work with – 2025. With challenging and painful reforms lying ahead and populations skeptical of their countries' membership prospects, this clear perspective and a given date could represent the final motivational boost for the region's leaders. Even more because the enhanced merit-based approach presented in the Strategy opens a competition among the candidate countries for a quick accession.

## Enlargement frontrunners and laggards: Deepening divisions, enhancing competition

While the new boost to the enlargement agenda represented by the Strategy is good news for the region, the clear differentiation between enlargement frontrunners and laggards in the document seems to have fostered a certain resentment in some political circles.

While Serbia and Montenegro emerge from the Strategy as unchallenged frontrunners with a possibility of accession by 2025 (although even the authors of the Strategy label this estimate as extremely ambitious), other countries are clearly lagging behind, to various extents and

<sup>1</sup> European Commission, A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans. Available at: [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans\\_en.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> European Commission, White Paper on the Future of Europe: Reflections and scenarios for the EU27 by 2025. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/white\\_paper\\_on\\_the\\_future\\_of\\_europe\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/white_paper_on_the_future_of_europe_en.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Srđan Cvijić: EU is ready to trade democracy for stability in the Western Balkans, *European Western Balkans*, available at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2017/04/05/srdan-cvijic-eu-is-ready-to-trade-democracy-for-stability-in-the-western-balkans/> and Peel, Michael et Buckley, Neil.

EU to map out membership for 6 western Balkan states. *Financial Times*, available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/e0774a28-0695-11e8-9650-9c0ad2d7c5b5>

for various reasons. The Strategy states that Albania and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia are close to being able to open accession negotiations with the Commission, provided they continue the reforms and fulfill the required conditions. This situation could prove frustrating for Macedonia, which was the first of the Western Balkan countries to apply for EU membership (in 2004) and was then granted candidate status in 2005; until the 2009 governmental crisis, the Commission repeatedly recommended opening accession negotiations with Skopje.<sup>4</sup> In spite of the recommendations, Macedonia's accession to EU, as well as to NATO, has been constantly blocked by Greece on the basis of the bilateral dispute regarding the country's official name. The renewed impetus in solving this situation could actually prove decisive on Skopje's path to the EU. On the other hand, Albania, which followed Macedonia with the application in 2009, was not granted candidate status until 2012 due to a lesser degree of compliance with the membership criteria.<sup>5</sup> The key obstacle to opening accession talks with Albania is the complex and difficult judicial reform, which the country is struggling with. In spite of its current status and the long way ahead, Albanian representatives are not short of optimism: Prime Minister Rama recently expressed his belief that Serbia will not join the EU earlier than Albania, mainly because of the required resolution of the Kosovo issue.<sup>6</sup>

The prospects for Bosnia and Herzegovina are for the country to become a candidate for accession by 2025, on the condition that it will keep on adopting and implementing necessary reforms. At the time of the release of the Strategy, the most urgent obstacle was the inability of the country's leaders to deliver the Questionnaire, which serves as the basis for the Commission's Opinion on Bosnia and Herzegovina and subsequent chance of being granted

candidate status. After the Strategy was published, this issue was resolved quite promptly and the country's representatives officially handed the Questionnaire over to Juncker by the end of February.<sup>7</sup> Although this has been a step in the right direction, it is hard to imagine the country being able to implement all the necessary reforms in the atmosphere of everlasting political stalemate caused by deep divisions along ethnic lines, nationalist attitudes and uncooperativeness of the country's leaders (and further supported by the unsuitable constitutional arrangement caused by The Dayton Agreement).

The 'loser' of the Strategy is clearly Kosovo. Compared to the other countries, its European perspective was hardly given any attention in the document. The Strategy only states that Kosovo 'has an opportunity for sustainable progress through implementation of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement and to advance on its European path once objective circumstances allow'. This lack of clarity on its European perspective shows once again that the EU ambiguity and disunity towards Kosovo brings additional complications to the process. This shortcoming of the Strategy was immediately pointed out by Kosovo President Hashim Thaci who expressed his impression that Kosovo was left behind.<sup>8</sup> As the frustrations created by enlargement fatigue in the region are at their peak, this lasting ambiguity and neglect in the document is not a good sign for the population of Kosovo. The problem will only grow more pressing in the future if the EU cannot speak with a common voice on the status of Kosovo. Even if Kosovo were to fulfill the required conditions, it would be still unclear whether a country that remains unrecognized by several EU member states could even start accession negotiations.

<sup>4</sup> European Commission, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/detailed-country-information/former-yugoslav-republic-of-macedonia\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/detailed-country-information/former-yugoslav-republic-of-macedonia_en)

<sup>5</sup> European Commission, Albania. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/detailed-country-information/albania\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/detailed-country-information/albania_en)

<sup>6</sup> Gray, Andrew. Serbia won't join EU before us, Albanian PM says. *Politico*. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/serbia-wont-join-eu-before-us-albanian-pm-says/>

<sup>7</sup> BiH leaders hand answered Questionnaire to Juncker, *European Western Balkans*, available at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2018/02/28/bih-leaders-hand-answered-questionnaire-juncker/>

<sup>8</sup> Thaci dissatisfied with the EU Strategy on Western Balkans, *Gazeta Express*, available at: <http://www.gazetaexpress.com/en/news/thaci-dissatisfied-with-the-eu-strategy-on-western-balkans-173582/>

## Moving forward or repeating past mistakes?

According to some experts, the Strategy suffers from a number of flaws<sup>9</sup>, and in spite of its significance for the enlargement process and the impetus it provides for the region after several years of lethargy, it is criticized for misunderstanding and misinterpreting the nature of politics and regional dynamics in the Western Balkans. It has been pointed out that despite the Strategy communicating a new approach to the enlargement process, its goal remains to implement the same old methods which have already proven to be ineffective.<sup>10</sup>

This is true in several aspects. While the Strategy draws attention to the critical state of the rule of law in the Western Balkan countries, referring for example to a 'state capture' by corrupt officials with links to organized crime groups, it does not suggest any solution or way to confront those responsible. The state of democracy in the Western Balkans is in decline, moving the countries further from the European values they are supposed to commit to, but the EU leaders always seem to be lulled by rhetorical reassurance provided by regional leaders of their commitment to reforms and their European future. In this respect, the Strategy has not brought anything new and only wiggles the 'carrot' more while being devoid of any 'sticks'.

Another open question is whether the decision to make the enlargement an individual process rather than a group effort was a good one. This approach ignores the tense bilateral relations between some countries<sup>11</sup> and creates possibilities to obstruct one another's work or to veto another's accession once a country joins the EU, which has been a problem in the past and still continues to be the case today.<sup>12</sup>

Another question is whether this new momentum and dedication to enlargement towards the Western Balkans is

not rather a geopolitically motivated step in reaction to Russia's rapidly growing influence in the region, and whether it could not lead to decisions based on geopolitical interests instead of a proper evaluation of the countries' readiness. As the recent Greek crisis has shown, rushed decisions based on geopolitical considerations and mistakes in judgement of the actual state of preparedness can lay the foundations of serious further problems. While the European Commission's skeptically-toned Opinion on Greek application for membership<sup>13</sup> in 1976 suggested a prolonged pre-accession period due to the country's unreadiness and mainly structural economic problems, in the frame of the Cold War's competitive geopolitical environment and the recent Greek turn to democracy, the Council quickly decided in Greece's favor.

With Russia becoming more assertive and active in the region, there are concerns inside the EU about the Western Balkan countries' possible geopolitical orientation. These circumstances raise the question of whether the EU leaders will not tend to be more forgiving towards the candidates in terms of fulfilling the requirements in face of the risk of their orientation Eastwards. Namely in the case of Serbia, lagging behind Montenegro in a number of chapters while still labelled as a frontrunner, there are already accusations of double standards and preferential treatment from the EU and opinions that Serbia was granted this position only because it plays the Russian card well.<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusion

While supporting the vision of the Western Balkans becoming an integral part of the EU, the Strategy pictures the state of reforms implementation in the countries without any idealism and addresses the most pertinent issues that need to be dealt with. Namely, it stresses the importance of strengthening the rule of law, increasing the competitiveness of region's economies and solving bilateral disputes.

<sup>9</sup> Kmezić, Marko. EU Western Balkans Strategy: On Named and Unnamed Elephants in the Room. *European Western Balkans*. Available at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2018/02/12/eu-western-balkans-strategy-named-unnamed-elephants-room/>

<sup>10</sup> Vogel, Toby. Europe's New Balkan Strategy Gets Dynamics All Wrong. *Balkan Insight*. Available at: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/europe-s-new-balkan-strategy-gets-dynamics-all-wrong-01-22-2018>

<sup>11</sup> This is mainly potential risk in the case of Serbia and Kosovo due to Kosovo's contested independence or Serbia and

Bosnia and Herzegovina due to the border dispute and Serbia's support to separatist Bosnian Serbs.

<sup>12</sup> As this is still an issue in the case of Greece and Macedonia or the ongoing border dispute between Croatia and Slovenia.

<sup>13</sup> European Commission, Commission on the Greek Request for Membership, available at: [http://aei.pitt.edu/30408/1/P\\_10\\_76.pdf](http://aei.pitt.edu/30408/1/P_10_76.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Cooper, Harry. Brussels is back into the Balkans, if selectively. *Politico*. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-balkan-love-letter-leaves-some-feeling-jilted/>

## České vize pro Evropu, evropské vize pro Česko Czech Visions for Europe, European Visions for the Czechs

A key set of conditions which will have to be fulfilled before the accession are the Copenhagen criteria which, as the Strategy acknowledges, none of the countries fulfill at this point. According to Freedom House's Nations in Transition Index, Serbia and Montenegro qualify as semi-consolidated democracies while the remainder of the countries in the region fall into the transitional government or hybrid regime category.<sup>15</sup> All of the countries still have serious problems with respect of the rule of law and are struggling with undue political interference and an underdeveloped private sector further undermining their economies.

It appears the EU takes its share of responsibility seriously. The Strategy introduced six flagship initiatives<sup>16</sup> enhancing its engagement with the Western Balkans in areas of mutual interest. These intensified efforts are to be

supported with gradually increased funding under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance until 2020. The Sofia Summit under the Bulgarian Presidency in May, the very first summit of member states' leaders together with their Western Balkan counterparts since the Thessaloniki summit in 2003, aims to take the support a step further and 'achieve a clear action plan with each of the countries of the Western Balkans...with concrete steps'.<sup>17</sup> However, at the end of the day, the success of the process depends on the determination of the countries' leaders and populations. As the Strategy states itself, 'joining the EU is a choice'. One which requires dedication from politicians as well as public and acceptance of their part of responsibility in this process.

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Jana graduated in International Relations at Masaryk University in Brno and continues her doctoral studies there with focus on the topic of regional cooperation in the Visegrad Group and the Western Balkans. During her studies, she spent a semester at the University of Bologna and participated in a summer university at the University of Pristina. In years 2015 to 2017, she worked for the Institute of International Relations in Prague. She obtained experience also in the Agora Central Europe organization, GLOBSEC or the EULEX mission to Kosovo. Her research focuses on regionalism, Visegrad cooperation, democratization and European integration of the Western Balkan countries, and EU enlargement.



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<sup>15</sup> Freedom House Index: Nations in Transit 2017 reports <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/nations-transit-2017>

<sup>16</sup> in the following areas: rule of law, security and migration, socio-economic development, transport and energy connectivity, digital agenda, reconciliation and good neighbourly relations.

<sup>17</sup> Radev, Borissov Hail EU Western Balkans Strategy, *BTA*. Available at: <http://www.bta.bg/en/c/DF/id/1740158>