



We are Europe VI: Western Balkans Reverse Report

Authors
Alen Gudalo,
Nejra Vreto-Milič
and Emil Kirjas



We are Europe VI
WESTERN BALKANS REVERSE REPORT

Edited by Alen Gudalo, Nejra Vreto and Emil Kirjas

Proofreading by Amina Šatrović-Barišić

European Liberal Forum EUPF
Rue d'Idalie 11-13, box 6, 1050 Ixelles, Brussels (BE)
info@liberalforum.eu
www.liberalforum.eu

Boris Divković Foundation
Jadranska 7, 71 000 Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina
office@bdf.ba
www.bdf.ba

D66 Internationaal / Stichting IDI
Hoge Nieuwstraat 30
2514 EL The Hague / The Netherlands
+31 70 35 66 06 6
internationaal@d66.nl
<https://internationaal.d66.nl/>

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The Liberal Integration Foundation was established in 2003 as the political foundation of Movement for Rights and Freedoms party (MRF), called upon to preserve and uphold the peaceful Bulgarian ethnic model, a successful development of multi-ethnic policy in Bulgaria, resulting in tolerant and peaceful cooperation of different ethnic and religious communities. It strives to provide good examples of the functioning of this model, characterized by stability, equality and common responsibility and contribute to safeguarding the Liberal values of equality, human dignity and rights. We represent the development of the multiethnic policy in the context of the transformation of Bulgarian society to democracy and spread the need for creating the conditions for preserving stability on the Balkans. The mission of the Liberal Integration Foundation is to disseminate and consolidate the basic values of modern liberalism - freedom, responsibility, tolerance, social justice and civil equality and insist on their practical realization. Our aim is supporting the integration of minorities, including ethnic minorities and increasing awareness and education of the public with respect to the better understanding of the liberal ideas. Assisting the development of ethnic tolerance, through establishment of public mechanisms for the realization of modern liberal values and supporting the process of integration of minorities in society.



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We are Europe too: Western Balkans Reverse Report

2024 will undoubtedly have its impact in shaping the EU-Balkans paradigm in the coming years. This year was, on one hand not only a year of European and U.S. elections, but also featured the long-awaited green light for negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina and adopting the New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, aimed to give the region the benefits of pre-accession membership, boost economic growth and accelerate much-needed socioeconomic convergence. This is a rather different context compared to 2019, when I began my work as the EP Rapporteur for North Macedonia.

The previous Commission talked about a moratorium on enlargement. And even within the announced trend of geo-strategic positioning since 2019, the process seemed stalled due to concerns about the EU's capacity to accept new members and the perceived need for institutional reforms. The dynamics of enlargement changed after the Russian aggression against Ukraine and especially after June 2022, when the European Council agreed to grant candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova and stated in its conclusions its full and clear commitment to the EU membership perspective of the Western Balkans, calling for an acceleration of the accession process.

The cornerstone of accelerated enlargement continues to lie in achieving visible progress and the ability of the candidate countries to meet the political and economic criteria for EU accession, their potential to adapt to EU rules through reforms in the rule of law, the fight against corruption, the protection of fundamental rights, and through the stability of political institutions and the convergence of economic differences. In parallel, internal discussions are continuing on institutional reforms to ensure effective decision-making and policies in an enlarged EU - on the abolition of unanimity voting on sensitive policy areas, on a larger budget, more own resources and strengthened instruments to address rule of law concerns.

Our shared task is to remove all doubts - that these two processes, of enlargement and of EU internal reform, can and should go hand in hand, not in sequence. Because Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has clearly shown the need for vision and for accelerated steps forward,

for decisive geostrategic investment in the region and for a stable, strong and united Europe that can return to its roots. We can prove that the European Union can play its role as a project of peace and prosperity in the years to come. We simply need to act united, and not miss out on the momentum to push for efforts in the both the region and the EU to reconcile history, geography and the strategic bond between the two.

Foreword by Ilhan Kyuchyuk

EU enlargement to the Western Balkans: Reality of geopolitical moment

Alen Gudalo
Bosnia and Herzegovina



CHAPTER 1

Chapter 1

EU enlargement to the Western Balkans: Reality of geopolitical moment

Alen Gudalo

Introduction

Since 2013, the Western Balkans' nations have seen limited progress toward joining the European Union. Enlargement in 2013, with Croatia joining the Union, brought back high expectations of further enlargement in matter of years: there was a strong motivation in Serbia and Montenegro in particular, but no new Balkans' countries have joined the Union. This paper portrays the complexity of geopolitics in the Western Balkans and shows various alternatives the nations in this region of Europe might have if the European Union (EU) does not show its relevance, and appetite to expand. Also, the number of geopolitical players highlights the fragility of the region, too: the lack of European presence, and inability to access the region with single and strong voice, was particularly tragic in the 90's. The European

Union should highlight its relevance more than before for the region, particularly after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which has served as a wakeup call for the Union to understand the region could easily slip away into the hands of other geopolitical players.

The report includes three key areas:

- Understanding the geopolitical dynamics in the Balkans and the European Union's role, not only as an economic power but also as an important geopolitical player. This section highlights specific challenges that require greater attention from Brussels-based decision-makers;
- The role of the Western Balkan leaders in the EU enlargement process, with a particular focus on liberal political leaders. It highlights how, despite coming from countries that often struggle to cooperate and have experienced strong political divisions, these leaders are united in their commitment to the integration of the region in the European Union;
- Making liberal youth voice heard: this section highlights the need to connect young liberal forces from the Western Balkans with Brussels institutions and presents perspectives from young members of liberal parties in the Western Balkans.

Significant concerns arose after the 2024 European elections, with the rise of radical and predominantly Euroskeptic political parties. However, the European Union's strong commitment in its 2024-2029 Strategic Agenda offers relief, not only to liberal political forces in the Western Balkans, but also to all parties aiming to join the integration process as

Since 2013, the Western Balkans' nations have seen limited progress toward joining the European Union

a strategic priority. The Western Balkans, long-standing candidates for EU membership, remain a strategic priority for the European Union. A merit-based accession process will strengthen both the EU and Western Balkan countries, but it is essential to recognize the geopolitical significance and risks associated with stalled enlargement.

The EU is aware of the socio-economic gap between itself and the Western Balkans, which will continue to pose a challenge in the next phases of their relationship. The introduction of initiatives like the Growth Plan, for instance, can be seen as a positive step toward narrowing this gap both economically and politically. However, local political forces often remain resistant, showing limited interest in cooperation. The European Union also faces considerable challenges in promoting itself as a key economic and geopolitical player in the region. Although public support for the EU membership is high in most countries, signs of erosion are visible across the Western Balkans. The increasing presence of BRICS in regional media, presenting itself as an easier and faster development alternative to the EU, is a growing concern that the EU must address. Enlargement has been slow, complex, and resource-costly, straining various political dynamics within the region. The idea of aligning with BRICS as a quick route to political relevance should not be underestimated. Western Balkan economies are small, and the potential accession of all these countries would likely have limited impact on the EU. However, the geopolitical consequences of the region remaining outside the EU are significant, and the EU must recognize this reality. Despite fluctuating enthusiasm and periods of stagnation, the prospect of accession should be seen not merely as an idea but as a real opportunity.

The Balkans' geopolitical dynamics: big pot with many ingredients

Although the enlargement has stayed at the focus of the EU agenda, even after the EU elections in June 2024, and with all countries in the Western Balkans prioritizing EU integration, the European Union faces strong competition for influence in the region. This competition includes not only China and Russia, but also regional players like Türkiye and Middle Eastern nations. To maintain its influence, the EU must demonstrate relevance across all areas of activity, going beyond its economic

relevance for the countries in the region.¹

The increasing involvement of these factors was already noted in 2016: Russia's presence became more visible and China's influence was on the rise. Türkiye and the United Arab Emirates also expanded their activities, not only in trade and investments but also through soft power initiatives such as media influence, cultural exchanges, and financial support for civil society organizations and political parties. These efforts ultimately enhance their influence over social and political players in the region. The United States consistently maintains its presence in the region and took swift actions² in response to political forces involved in conflicts across the Balkans. Despite a tendency to align on key political and economic interests and issues in the region, the European Union and the United States do not always achieve satisfactory results even when they promote ideas together.³

The European Union has played a crucial role as a major economic and humanitarian force, serving as a unifying factor for citizens and mainstream political parties rallying around the agenda of EU integration. Despite this, criticisms emerged in the aftermath of the 90s regarding the EU's perceived failure to act decisively and clearly against anti-democratic, hate-driven politics that dominated the region during that decade. In short, the EU failed to serve as a credible military factor to prevent the war, even to act an effective mediator to find a feasible settlement in the region.⁴

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- 1 Simurdić, M., Teokarević, J., Minić, J., & Đukanović, D. (2016). Spoljnopolitičke sveske: Zapadni Balkan između geografije i geopolitike. In Fondacija Fridrih Ebert (No. 01/16). Fondacija Fridrih Ebert. Retrieved July 10, 2024, from <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/belgrad/12678.pdf>
 - 2 US involvement in creation of the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995, the US involvement in the 1999 Kosovo war and strong involvement in drafting the Ohrid Agreement after the 2001 Macedonian conflict serve as a strong proof of relevance of the USA in the region
 - 3 BIRN analysis: Put to sleep by Albania, the Open Balkans did not achieve its stated goals. (2023, July 14). Politiko. Retrieved July 2, 2024, from <https://politiko.al/english/e-tjera/analiza-e-birn-vendo-sur-ne-gjume-nga-shqiperia-ballkani-i-hapur-nuk-i-ar-i487490>
 - 4 Arian, H. (2009). The European Union Policy towards the Balkan States in the Post-Cold War Era. SDU Faculty of Arts and Sciences Journal of Social Sciences Special Issue on the Balkans, 2009(Issue: 2, 24-31), 15. Retrieved JULY 2, 2024, from <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/sufesosbil/issue/11418/136388>

However, the early 2000s brought a wave of optimism across the region with democratic changes in Serbia, reconstruction projects, and increasing ties between the region and the EU. This optimism was enhanced by the accession of countries from the wider region into the Union, such as Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania, and finally, Croatia.

Despite these positive developments, crises such as the Kosovo crisis in 2004 and ongoing disputes following Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008, as well as the crisis in North Macedonia in 2015, underline the importance for Brussels to maintain a constant focus on the region. Mentioned events and examples serve as a clear proof local political players are not able to solve key regional issues alone.

The EU's constructive involvement, exemplified by the Prespa Agreement in 2018, further demonstrates its relevance to local decision-makers. With strong guidance from Brussels, the decision makers from Greece and North Macedonia were able to reach a landmark deal that resolved one of the region's key longstanding political issues. Direct and successful involvement of the European Union, to cope with regional political disputes, keeps the region closer to the Union, as no other geo-political players, but the Union and the United States, have been able to be seen as constructive political players to deal with local problems and conflicts.

The Russian aggression against Ukraine has underscored the European Union's imperative to maintain its focus and interest in the region by advocating for enlargement as a strategic objective. Consequently, Bosnia and Herzegovina received a positive response in late 2022, becoming a candidate country and subsequently being granted the decision to begin accession negotiation talks with the Union in March 2024. While the decision was welcomed by experts in Bosnia and Herzegovina, local politicians should have made greater efforts to clarify that this decision was a result of geopolitical shifts in Europe.⁵

5 Saopštenje Inicijative za monitoring europskih integracija: "Pozdravljamo odluku o otvaranju pregovora između BiH i EU – vrijeme je za suštinski iskorak u ispunjavanju reformi na putu prema članstvu BiH u EU." (2024, March 22). EU-Monitoring.ba. Retrieved July 2, 2024, from <https://eu-monitoring.ba/saopstenje-inicijative-za-monitoring-europskih-integracija-pozdravljamo-odluku-o-otvaranju-pregovora-i-zmedju-bih-i-eu-vrijeme-je-za-sustinski-iskorak-u-ispunjavanju-reformi-na-putu-prema/>

Shortly after the February 2022 full scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the signs of presence of the European Union, beyond economy, have been everywhere, including more visible presence of EUFOR peacekeeping force in Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁶ This action not only fulfilled the EUFOR mandate on the ground, but also sent a powerful symbolic message to other geopolitical players, especially Russia and its influential allies in the region. It also highlighted the EU's commitment to the region's stability as one of its primary objectives.

However, a slow progress toward full EU integration can become a rallying point for various political actors across the region to seek alternative paths. The process of integration is slow, it exhausts local politics and reforms on the EU path are often painful, while the certainty of accession is not always clear. This situation should raise concerns in Brussels as it questions whether EU integration remains the sole political solution for the nations of the Western Balkans. For example, a statement by a top official from the conservative right-wing Party of Democratic Action (SDA) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, currently in the opposition, is illustrative. Zahiragić indicated his intention to seek new alliances for the Bosniak people, specifically mentioning China and Russia as primary options.⁷

6 Latal, S. (2022, February 24). EU Doubles Bosnia Peacekeepers as Global Security 'Deteriorates.' *Balkan in Sight*. Retrieved July 2, 2024, from <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/02/24/eu-doubles-bosnia-peacekeepers-as-global-security-deteriorates/>

7 Bošnjaci se okreću Rusima?? Zahiragić izazvao buru reakcija; SDA se ogradila od njegove izjave. (2023, February 20). [Video]. Youtube. Retrieved June 30, 2024, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cemoLljJzOE>

Direct and successful involvement of the European Union, to cope with regional political disputes, keeps the region closer to the Union

On the other hand, this highlights how local politics can swiftly alter the dynamics and orientations of political parties, depending on whether they are in power or not, and how such positions influence geopolitical preferences.

Another example of how local politics merge with geopolitics could be seen in 2022, when the most prominent Croat political party in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the HDZ (Croat Democratic Union) voted against sanctions to Russia.⁸ This decision has delayed the alignment of Bosnian foreign policy with the European Union, which is a crucial priority for any country aspiring to join the Union.

This demonstrates that geopolitical alignments are frequently shaped at the local level, underscoring the need for the European Union to pay closer attention to local political dynamics to maintain its relevance in the region - in short, regional political forces are willing to bring their countries closer to other geo-political blocks beside the EU, if they see the opportunity through it to stay in power.

Russia has been strongly visible in the region, benefiting from long historical presence and strong emotional support seen particularly in Serbia, Montenegro and the entity of Republika Srpska, in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine has basically opened the hidden doors behind which Russia has been working hard to spread its influence. For example, already highlighted by the European Liberal Forum⁹ where, without strong economic means, Russia has been able to be present and gain support from local political forces and citizens through working closely with informal associations and military-style groups across the region under the umbrella of humanitarian and cultural work.

This also highlights the complexity behind the world of geopolitics and levels of influences and tools used to access the region. This approach

8 Dš. (2022, March 24). HDZ BiH glasao protiv uvođenja sankcija Rusiji! Rijeka Danas. Retrieved June 30, 2024, from <https://www.rijekadanas.com/hdz-bih-glasao-protiv-uvodenja-sankcija-rusiji/>

9 Gudalo, A. (2023). Putin's Europe - Unveiling the Shadow - Russian Influence in the Western Balkans via Informal Networks and Civil Society Organizations -pg 320 -342. European Liberal Forum. Retrieved June 30, 2024, from <https://liberalforum.eu/publication/putins-europe/>

allows Russia to act as a spoiler in local politics, for example, and to obstruct its halting movement toward NATO and EU integration.¹⁰ Political instabilities in the Western Balkans, and potential new conflicts, would work in Russia's favor since it would distract the European Union and allow Russia to get direct access to political forces involved in conflicts - in short, another war in the Balkans would be very welcomed by Russia.¹¹ If the EU is preoccupied with managing and resolving conflicts in the Balkans, beside other regions involved in wars, including Ukraine, it could divert attention, resources, and political capital away. This distraction could potentially weaken the EU's unity and coherence in its engagement with the Western Balkans having the long-term effects in geo-political relevance of the Union in the Western Balkans.

Yet another challenge prevents the EU from being a stable and constant geopolitical force in the Balkans: the EU often fails to deliver on its promises. One significant example is a case where the EU successfully resolved a major political issue between North Macedonia and Greece, through extensive involvement, but this only left citizens and local leaders feeling let down by the EU's actions afterward. Additional delays on bringing the country closer to the EU affected local politics as well, and brought defeat to a party that worked closely on negotiating the deal with Greece while bringing the victory for a party that developed a Euroskeptical stance. Dissatisfaction with the European course creates a window of opportunity for Russia and China and this is also an extremely undesirable scenario for the EU.¹²

Russia clearly recognizes the anger of local politicians and citizens and is trying to materialize such frustrations through using targeted

10 Bechev, D. (2024, June 27). Between the EU and Moscow: How Russia exploits divisions in Bosnia. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Retrieved June 30, 2024, from <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/06/bosnia-between-russia-eu?lang=en>

11 Bazail-Eimil, E., & Berg, M. (2024, May 29). Why Putin's next target could be the Balkans. Politico. Retrieved July 13, 2024, from <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/national-security-daily/2024/05/29/why-putins-next-target-could-be-the-balkans-00160479>

12 European Pravda, & Filippov, A. (2024, May 9). How EU backed North Macedonia's European path into a corner. European Pravda. Retrieved July 13, 2024, from <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/eng/news/2024/05/9/7185611/>

disinformation campaigns - including online trolling and fake news - to "fracture the social fabric of society" in the country and the wider Western Balkans and stall their accession to the EU.¹³ Again, in North Macedonia, we witnessed the shift in local politics, and creation of new challenges that could potentially hinder the implementation of a deal between Greece and North Macedonia which was promoted and supported by the European Union.¹⁴

To address these issues and keep its influence in the Balkans solid, the EU should prioritize consistency in delivering on its commitments.

This includes expediting the accession process for countries that have made significant compromises and reforms towards EU membership. This way the EU can reinforce pro-European sentiment, and counteract external geo-political efforts across the Western Balkans.

Economy as a geopolitical tool - EU's strong asset

Due to often limited internal cohesion in several areas, which diminishes the EU's geopolitical influence, the key question is how the economy could serve as a means for the EU to assert its geopolitical positioning in the Western Balkans—an area where both China and particularly Russia have not fully capitalized.

For example, among Albania's top five export destinations, the first four are EU member states, collectively accounting for 63% of all exports. China, in contrast, occupies the fifth position with only 4%. On the import side, three EU member states also feature among Albania's top five import partners, covering 42% of all imports.

Here, China ranks fourth, demonstrating its significant role as an import partner to Albania. Türkiye, on the other hand, stands out as the second

13 Jones, M. G. (2024, January 24). Russia trying to 'hijack' frustration with EU accession delay - North Macedonia FM. Euronews, Retrieved June 30, 2024, from <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/01/24/russia-trying-to-hijack-frustration-with-eu-accession-delay-north-macedonia-fm>

14 Stamouli, N. (2024, May 12). North Macedonia president-elect sparks row with Greece at swearing-in. POLITICO. Retrieved June 30, 2024, from <https://www.politico.eu/article/north-macedonia-president-elect-sparks-row-with-greece-swearing-in-ceremony/>

largest import partner, enhancing its influence and expanding its relevance in the region.¹⁵

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the situation on the ground was similar: in 2023, the country imported 59% of its goods from the EU and exported 73% of its products to the EU. Despite significant imports from China, which placed the country among the top five import-trade partners, Bosnia and Herzegovina's exports to China did not reach high levels, thereby not placing China among its top ten export destinations in 2023. However, the overall trade balance still positioned both China and Russia among Bosnia and Herzegovina's top ten trading partners.¹⁶

According to Kosovo Customs, Kosovo's main trade partners are the EU countries (approximately 44 percent of imports and 30 percent of exports) and its Western Balkans neighbors, with which Kosovo trades tariff-free under the terms of the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA).¹⁷

Montenegro's data confirms strong orientation toward the EU with 45,7% all imports coming from the EU and 34,9% of all exports going to the EU in 2023. Similarly to other countries in the region, both Türkiye and China had strong presence in Montenegrin economy, particularly as import partners.¹⁸

Around 50% of all imports to North Macedonia in 2022 came from the European Union: equally, this country exported around 76% of all its

15 The World Factbook. (2024, June 25). CIA. Retrieved June 30, 2024, from <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/albania/#economy>

16 Factsheets: country details, Bosnia and Herzegovina. (2024). In European Union, Trade in Goods With Bosnia-Herzegovina. European Commission. Retrieved June 30, 2024, from https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_bosnia-herzegovina_en.pdf

17 Kosovo - market overview. (2024, January 24). International Trade Administration | Trade.gov. Retrieved June 30, 2024, from <https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/kosovo-market-overview>

18 Factsheets: country details, Montenegro. (2024). In European Union, Trade in Goods With Montenegro. European Commission. Retrieved June 30, 2024, from https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_montenegro_en.pdf

products to the European Union member states.¹⁹

Finally, Serbia is also strongly oriented toward the European Union and follows the suit with 57% of all imports getting into the country coming from the European Union and exporting 63,2% of total exporting into the Union in 2023.²⁰

Such information confirms strong links between the Western Balkans nations and the European Union which could serve as a stable source for next steps of integration.

This brief economic data overview highlights two important realities: firstly, the EU continues to have significant influence over the local economies and has effectively linked the economic fortunes of the Western Balkans to itself. On the other hand, Russia has cultivated its influence in the region primarily through political maneuvering, aligning its interests by developing strong connections with key decision-makers at various levels, both formally and informally. This strategy is also supported by historical ties and recent events, such as Russian condemnation of NATO's 1999 bombing of Yugoslavia, support for Serbia in the UN Security Council, and its recent vote against the UN resolution on the Srebrenica genocide. Symbolic gestures, such as Putin's award to Dodik²¹, also play a role. However, often overlooked are economic agreements, such as the significant gas deal between Russia and Serbia.²² Although Serbia represents a small market to Russia, it still presents a significant market due to its geo-political relevance where economic indicators are overlooked in favor of geo-politics.

19 Where does North Macedonia export to? (2022) | The Observatory of Economic Complexity. (n.d.). The Observatory of Economic Complexity. Retrieved July 30, 2024, from https://oec.world/en/visualize/tree_map/hs92/export/mkd/show/all/2022

20 Saopštenje - Statistika spoljne trgovine. (2024). In Republički Zavod Za Statistiku (No. 19). Republički zavod za statistiku. Retrieved June 30, 2024, from <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2024/Pdf/G20241019.pdf>

21 S., S. (2023, June 6). Vladimir Putin odlikovao Milorada Dodika. Dnevni Avaz. Retrieved July 13, 2024, from <https://www.avaz.ba/vijesti/bih/835568/vladimir-putin-odlikovao-milorada-dodika>

22 Đurović, J. (2022, May 30). Koliko će Srbiju politički koštati povoljan ruski gas? Glas Amerike. <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/6595118.html>

China in the heart of the Balkans

The visit of the Chinese president Xi Jinping to Serbia in May 2024 was not only a symbolic gesture, but rather a clear political message China is here, planning to stay. Among numerous countries in Europe, the Chinese president visited only two - France and Serbia. This could be read two-fold: firstly, China has strong interest to learn how to navigate and get through strong EU economic mechanisms that causes headache to Chinese political and economic elite.

Secondly, China understands the relevance of Serbia in the Western Balkans and potential impact of economic and political presence of China in the region. Not only that, growing discontent by the European Union in Serbia and slow and mixed signals from EU members states, when it comes to enlargement of the Union, brings China closer to the region, where, with its economic deals, could fill this political gap and become the most relevant geo-political player between the Adriatic Sea and Danube River.

The geographic position of the Balkans, as a link between the rest of Europe and Asia, serves as a good example how geography motivates and helps geo-political powers to spread their influence. The Chinese presence has been long and promoted additionally through the 16+1 Initiative²³ (now 14+1) that brings together, both EU members states, mostly from central and south-eastern Europe, and non-EU member states from the Western Balkans. China has invested heavily in infrastructure to boost connectivity and economic growth in the region and presence of its big companies across the Western Balkans. However, these investments have sparked worries about debt and China's influence in Europe via the Balkans. The answer to growing Chinese present, mostly through big economic deals that successfully link the region with Chinese strategic goals, is to keep the enlargement and accession of the Western Balkans' countries into the Union, as a rational, real and certain political move. Without certainty, it would become increasingly hard for the

23 Zeneli, V. (2023, February 6). Chinese influence in the Western Balkans and its impact on the region's European Union integration process. IWM. Retrieved July 13, 2024, from <https://www.iwm.at/blog/chinese-influence-in-the-western-balkans-and-its-impact-on-the-regions-european-union>

countries in the Western Balkans to stay motivated to continue tough reforms that will open the doors of the Union.

The certainty of enlargement as a key EU geopolitical card in the Western Balkans

The reality of geopolitical moment brings both, cautious optimism and concerns, where strong economic links, close geographic proximity of the EU and strong human contact have not been enough to secure full geopolitical dominance of the EU in the region.

Concerns about support for the EU in the region have been additionally highlighted after the research in 2020 which, showed every fourth citizen in the Western Balkans believe no country from the region will ever join the Union. The results were particularly worrying in Serbia, where almost half of those who answered, believed Serbia will never become an EU member state. In Bosnia and Herzegovina every third person answered the same. Montenegro was the only country where citizens showed a bit of optimism with the accession perspective by 2030.²⁴

The key lesson, and recommendation, for the European Union is to work on maintaining support from citizens and act immediately once the support declines. Without citizens' involvement and their support for challenging reform path, it will be difficult to maintain presence and keep the spirit high. EU integration process proved to be time-consuming and complicated, which over time made citizens lose interest in joining directly and oversee how the EU integration actually creates an impact on their lives. This should serve as a signal for the Union to create more coherent regional initiatives that will bring decision makers around the table, as well as keep track of involvement of other global and regional geo-political players, that maintain strong regional networks and partnerships with decision makers.

The European Union should put more focus on understanding how long-term misinformation campaigns have damaged the image of the Union in the Western Balkans. This is becoming increasingly challenging

²⁴ Balkan Barometer 2020 - Public Opinion - Analytical Report. (2020). Regional Cooperation Council. Retrieved July 13, 2024, from <https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/publications>

due to swift development of technology and inability of the European Union to clearly promote its key values and show how positively it has affected the lives of those who live in the Western Balkans. At the same time, other geo-political players have been able to communicate key messages using simple language, fake information and numerous digital resources to access citizens. This also highlights complexity behind the levels of geo-political influence applied by political players.

Finally, accession of a new country from the Western Balkans, would serve as clear sign the European Union see the region as its partner. This will also serve as motivation to countries across the Western Balkans to continue working on their EU path as certainty of accession gives more leverage to the Union instead of "perspective" of accession that has been promised, but not delivered. The reality of geopolitics dictates that the EU may never be the sole geo-political player in the Balkans, putting additional pressure to satisfy local decision-makers and citizens. Strong cross-regional support for EU integration, with the current exception of Serbia, forms a strong basis for further engagement in the region.

The EU has developed strong connections with the Western Balkans and its people through complex, long-term economic, political, cultural and other agreements that bring the region closer to Brussels. The inclusion of enlargement in the EU Strategic Agenda 2024-2029 reaffirms the Union's commitment to the region once again. This paper does not propose abandoning the EU's merit-based approach to the Western Balkans, but urges an understanding of local political dynamics and reform path that is often influenced by geopolitical forces beyond the EU's control. Each decision to open negotiations and chapters for the Western Balkan countries highlights the Union's political significance for these nations. It's crucial to maintain momentum and clear off enlargement fatigue arguments, especially since the last enlargement in the region was over a decade ago.

Accelerated by strong geopolitical developments in Europe, a new enlargement would demonstrate the EU's interest in maintaining its economic and political relevance for the region and its people, but it will also show the strength of geo-political performance of the European Union.

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Leadership response: WB liberal leaders' approach to EU enlargement

Emil Kirjas
North Macedonia



CHAPTER 2

Chapter 2

Leadership response: WB liberal leaders' approach to EU enlargement

Emil Kirjas

The ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine has underscored the importance of European integration and the need to support the Western Balkan countries in their path towards European Union membership. This crisis has created a renewed sense of urgency and a recognition that a stable and prosperous Western Balkans is essential for European security and stability. Liberal parties in the region have seized this opportunity to advocate for accelerated EU accession processes, emphasizing the benefits that EU membership can bring to both the Western Balkans and the EU. The leaders of Nasa Stranka (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Democratic Party of Kosovo (Kosovo), Liberal Party of Montenegro (Montenegro), Liberal Democratic Party (North Macedonia) and Free Citizens Alliance (Serbia) speak with one voice: EU membership for their countries has no alternative, and it should happen soon.

Renewed enthusiasm for EU membership

The clear path to European Union membership that was offered to the countries of the Western Balkans with the adoption of the famous Thessaloniki Agenda in June 2004 has materialized only in the case of Croatia, which became an EU member in 2013. Twenty years on, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, now famously known as WB6, are still dreaming about membership in the EU, as there is still no clear end-date for their ultimate goal to be equal part of the European family of nations for any of them. They are all in different stages of integration, with Montenegro being most advanced and having opened all negotiation chapters, while Kosovo trailing the last without even recognized status of a candidate country.

Several factors have contributed to the slow progress in realizing the Thessaloniki Agenda. One key obstacle has been the unresolved legacy of the 1990s wars, which has left deep scars on the region with matters such as bilateral and territorial disputes, minority rights, and war crimes traumas hindering national agendas, regional cooperation and reconciliation. Significant internal challenges, including corruption, organized crime, and economic difficulties, continue to hinder the ability of WB6 to meet the EU's accession criteria.

EU's own internal challenges and competing priorities have slowed down the accession process. The enlargement process has been

Western Balkans is essential for European security and stability

affected by the bloc's preoccupation with other issues, such as the eurozone crisis, Brexit, and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Additionally, there have been differing views among EU member states regarding the pace and scope of enlargement, with some countries expressing concerns about the previous enlargement process, exemplified by the democratic backsliding in countries like Hungary and Poland and thus argued that the EU cannot repeat the mistake by admitting the region without full preparedness to join the Union.

Despite these setbacks and the notable decline of enthusiasm among the people in the region, the membership of the Western Balkan countries in the EU remains a national priority for each country in the region. At least, that is the case declaratively. The most fervent supporters of this process are the liberal parties in the region, which regained their enthusiasm with the enlargement momentum created in the EU with Russia's war in Ukraine and the understanding among the European political elites in the EU that the geopolitical realities in the world indicate that leaving more space for further delays of European integration works to the clear benefit of EU's global competitors and adversaries.

Leaders of Western Balkan liberal parties have consistently expressed their strong support for EU enlargement, citing the numerous advantages it can offer their countries. In light of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, Western Balkan liberal leaders have argued that EU enlargement is not only a matter of regional stability but also a strategic imperative for the EU itself. By supporting the Western Balkan countries' integration into the EU, the EU can demonstrate its commitment to European values, strengthen its geopolitical position, and counter Russian influence in the region.

By demonstrating their commitment to European integration and meeting the EU's accession criteria, the peoples from these countries have shown that they are willing to become full members of the European family. The region must continue to address its internal challenges, deepen regional cooperation, and implement the necessary reforms to meet the EU's accession criteria. The EU, in turn, must maintain a credible enlargement perspective and provide the necessary support to help the Western Balkan countries achieve their European integration goals. Now

it is the time for the political forces on national and European level to accelerate the process, set it as a priority and deliver for the citizens across Europe.

Western Balkan countries have made significant progress in implementing EU-related reforms and addressing the challenges of the past. With focused and determined work on national and European level, both on reaching the criteria and reforming the EU, the end goal for membership by 2030, suggested in by the President of the European Council Charles Michel last year, does seem as realistic possibility to many.

EU membership need: a consensus among liberal leaders

The leaders of the Western Balkan liberal parties Edin Forto (Nasa Stranka, Bosnia and Herzegovina), Memli Krasniqi (Democratic Party, Kosovo), Vatroslav Belan (Liberal Party, Montenegro), Monika Zajkova (Liberal Democratic Party, North Macedonia) and Pavle Grbović (Free Citizens Movement, Serbia) overwhelmingly support their countries' accession to the European Union. They have all built their political carriers working closely with the EU to address their national challenges and implement the necessary reforms to advance their countries' EU accession processes.

This stance is rooted in a shared belief that EU membership will be advantageous for all – both for the peoples of the aspirant countries and those of the current EU member states. By aligning with EU standards, their countries can strengthen their democratic institutions, boost economic prosperity, and enhance regional stability. Regardless of whether they are in governing coalition, as it is the case in Bosnia, or as members of the opposition in the other Western Balkan countries, for the liberal leaders the EU membership offers an opportunity for deepening historical, cultural, and political ties with Europe, thus reinforcing the identity of these countries as part of the European family of nations. While there may be some nuances in their specific approaches or priorities, these leaders generally share a vision of a European future for their countries, driven by the belief that EU membership will bring significant benefits to their citizens.

Boosting EU's credibility as a factor of success

The world today has significantly changed from the days when the EU started enlarging itself with the countries that belonged to the Eastern Block in the 1990s. Faced with geopolitical competitiveness of the eastern autocracies and so called "illiberal democracies", as well as with the access to both information and misinformation, the people in the accession countries weigh in differently the opportunities and the advantages of the EU accession process. The Regional Cooperation Council research found in 2023 a worrisome tendency of decline of support for EU membership in the region, with highest EU-enthusiasm of 92% in Albania and lowest in Serbia with only 34%.

Asked for their reflection on the EU enlargement process with the region and its credibility, the opinions of the Western Balkan leaders reflect concerns about the slow pace of the process, which has diminished enthusiasm and credibility among candidate countries. While some acknowledge the EU's fairness, they argue that the Union's inconsistent approach and delays have led to skepticism and a loss of trust. However, the geopolitical shifts following Russia's aggression against Ukraine have renewed the strategic importance of enlargement for both security and stability in Europe. There is a consensus that the EU must be more decisive and consistent, while candidate countries need to fulfil their obligations. Despite criticisms, the EU is still viewed as a credible and fair partner, but there is a strong call for faster and more effective action to ensure successful integration of the Western Balkans and other candidate countries.

The mixed concerns and hopes with regards to the enlargement process and EU's approach and credibility towards candidate countries stem from the different realities in the respective countries:

- **Slow Progress and Lost Enthusiasm:** Multiple voices, including Memli Krasniqi, Monika Zajkova, and Pavle Grbović, highlight the slow pace of the enlargement process. They argue that the delay has caused a loss of enthusiasm and credibility among candidate countries, making them skeptical about the EU's commitment.
- **Geopolitical Importance Post-Ukraine War:** Grbović and Belan stress that the Russian aggression against Ukraine has reinvigorated the EU's

strategic interest in enlargement. This shift is seen as essential for collective security and countering influence from powers like Russia, a nation that has traditionally high influence both in Serbia and in Montenegro.

- **Need for EU Consistency and Credibility:** Zajkova and Belan emphasize the need for the EU to be consistent and credible in its approach. EU's unfair treatment of North Macedonia marked by lack of delivery stands out as an example. Zajkova points out the issue of double standards and suggests a more inclusive and staged/phased enlargement process, while Belan believes that the EU has sometimes lacked understanding and decisiveness but remains credible overall.

- **Responsibility of Candidate Countries:** Both Belan and Forto acknowledge that while the EU has a role to play, the candidate countries themselves must fulfil their obligations and meet EU criteria. Belan stresses that the Western Balkans must seize this "last period" before the end of the decade for successful integration.

- **EU's Fairness and Strategic Focus:** Forto and Belan suggest that the EU is fair in its dealings, with Forto specifically mentioning Bosnia and Herzegovina's positive experience. Belan hopes the next EU Commission will focus more on enlargement, viewing it as crucial for both the EU and the candidate countries.

Faced with the momentum that exists in the EU for the integration of Ukraine and Moldova, and the highly unusual speed that their membership applications have been treated compared to the ones of the Western Balkan nations, the party leaders insist that a faster and more

There is a consensus that the EU must be more decisive and consistent, while candidate countries need to fulfil their obligations

consistent action is needed to restore trust and enthusiasm in the enlargement process with the Western Balkans.

National realities make for different membership prospects

The national realities in the Western Balkans differ, so do the national EU accession processes. With Montenegro being most advanced from all EU candidate hopefuls, the nation is eyeing to become the first country to join the Union once the block reaches an internal consensus for admitting new member states. To the east, Montenegro's neighbor Kosovo is yet to become officially recognized as a candidate country for EU membership. Serbia opened its EU accession negotiations in 2014 and has stalled in the last years, while Albania and North Macedonia, have completed the screening process for negotiation since being green-lighted for accession talks in 2022, but are suffering from bilateral blocks from Greece and Bulgaria respectively to have their first negotiation chapters opened. These varying perspectives on EU enlargement reveal a complex and challenging landscape for the aspiring countries, each facing unique obstacles and opportunities in their path towards EU membership.

Bosnia and Herzegovina:

Bosnia and Herzegovina is currently at the stage of preparing to open accession negotiations with the EU, having received a green light from the European Commission and the Council earlier this year. However, the country is moving slowly in preparing for the extensive work required for the negotiation process. Edin Forto, Minister of Transport in the national government and leader of the liberal party Naša Stranka, highlights that while there is broad public support for EU membership, with most citizens eager to see progress, the government's preparations have not been adequate to meet the challenges ahead. The slow pace of these preparations reflects a broader issue of inefficiency and lack of political urgency in Bosnia's approach to EU integration. Nonetheless, the initiation of negotiations is seen as a critical next step, and there is hope that this will catalyse more focused efforts from both the government and civil society.

Kosovo:

Kosovo is currently at the very end of the EU enlargement process, with its relations with the EU having significantly stalled. Initially, the EU was

seen as a key catalyst for reforms and progress in Kosovo, but in recent years, the relationship has been overshadowed by the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue. This dialogue, which has not been effectively managed by the EU, Serbia, or Kosovo, has led to punitive measures against Kosovo by the EU. The process is described as "clinically dead," indicating a complete breakdown of any meaningful progress. Memli Krasniqi, himself being a key political figure in Kosovo, argues that the enlargement process for Kosovo should not remain hostage to its relations with Serbia. He advocates for a reset in Kosovo-EU relations, focusing not only on the dialogue with Serbia but also on the broader enlargement agenda. However, with upcoming elections in Kosovo, Krasniqi does not foresee significant progress in the short term. He remains hopeful that in the medium term, with new leadership in both the EU and Kosovo, there could be a renewed effort to accelerate Kosovo's EU integration.

Montenegro:

Montenegro faces a unique set of challenges in its EU integration process. While the country has made progress in some areas, the current political climate is heavily influenced by pro-Russian, anti-Western parties within the government and parliamentary majority. LPCG's leader Vatroslav Belan argues that this poses a significant threat to Montenegro's EU aspirations, as these elements are fundamentally opposed to European values and integration. He believes that the EU must take a firmer stance, making it clear that double-dealing and alignment with pro-Russian ideologies will not be tolerated. For Montenegro to move forward, a change in government is necessary, one that fully embraces European integration and rejects any form of compromise with anti-European forces. Belan hopes that the upcoming changes in the EU leadership will bring renewed focus and support for Montenegro's EU aspirations. He stresses the importance of synergy between Brussels and Podgorica, where both sides work in partnership towards the common goal of Montenegro's accession. Without this clear commitment, he warns, Montenegro risks remaining in a geopolitical limbo, torn between Western democracies and Eastern autocracies.

North Macedonia:

North Macedonia's path to EU membership has been particularly fraught, despite its successful completion of the EU screening process. The

recent change in government has led to a narrative where the new conservative leadership claims to be pro-European but is unwilling to accept conditions that fall outside the Copenhagen criteria, which are the rules that define whether a country is eligible to join the EU. A major hurdle for North Macedonia is the need to amend its Constitution, a requirement linked to its complex relations with Bulgaria. The lack of progress in these relations, combined with political instability in Bulgaria and lack of political government in Sofia, has caused the EU accession process to stall, leading to growing disappointment among Macedonian citizens. Monika Zajkova, LDP's leader and MP, expresses concern that while Albania may continue to advance in its EU integration, North Macedonia could yet remain stuck due to this bilateral issue. Despite these challenges, Zajkova remains cautiously optimistic that North Macedonia will soon begin formal negotiations and achieve key reforms. She also stresses that the EU must actively support North Macedonia, especially given the significant concession the country made in resolving its long-standing name dispute.

Serbia:

In Serbia, the political climate towards EU integration is complicated by the influence of anti-Western propaganda, which is heavily promoted by media outlets close to the government and by Russian influence. Despite this, most Serbian citizens recognize that Serbia's political, geographical, and cultural identity is aligned with Europe, and they aspire to the standard of living and freedoms that EU membership promises. However, the Serbian government has been hesitant to make crucial reforms, particularly in the area of rule of law, and has yet to impose sanctions on Russia, a key EU expectation in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine. It also fails to fully align itself with the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the EU with regards to sanctions against Putin's Russia. Pavle Grbović, recently re-elected MP and PSG leader, suggests that while Serbia has the potential to make rapid progress in EU integration, it remains stuck due to a lack of political will and expertise within the government. He envisions that the Western Balkans, including Serbia, could achieve EU membership by the end of this decade, though Montenegro might be an exception, being closer to accession due to its more advanced integration efforts.

Liberal solutions for accelerating the process

There is a clear need to accelerate the process of transformation of the Western Balkan nations, which itself should lead to their faster preparedness for EU membership. The countries in the region need EU's unwavering support to achieve that. The leaders emphasize the need for significant changes both within their countries and in their relationship with the EU to accelerate the enlargement process. They highlight the importance of aligning government actions with pro-European values, especially in overcoming domestic political obstacles and reducing the influence of anti-European forces.

Internally, they call for stronger, more committed leadership that prioritizes EU integration as a central goal. For example, Kosovo's leadership needs to reset its approach to the EU, focusing on broader strategic goals beyond just the technicalities of the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue. In Serbia, there's a recognition that the country must address its internal issues - like strengthening institutions, media freedom, and electoral integrity - to make genuine progress toward EU membership. In North Macedonia, there's a need for more decisive and continuous state processes, particularly in building public trust in the EU and resolving bilateral disputes that hinder progress. Montenegro faces a critical challenge in overcoming the influence of pro-Russian, anti-European elements within its government, which requires a complete political shift towards genuinely pro-European governance.

From the EU's side, the leaders suggest that the enlargement process needs to become more results-oriented and dynamic. They propose that the EU should provide tangible incentives to candidate countries before full membership is achieved, such as integration into the common market or an immediate participation in EU institutions as observers until full membership is obtained in mid-term. This would help maintain momentum and public support for EU integration. Additionally, the EU is urged to treat enlargement as a top priority, learning from the successful enlargement of the Eastern Bloc in the 1990s, where clear strategies, timelines, and coordinated efforts across all member states were the key. There is a strong belief that the EU must overcome internal divisions and present a united, enthusiastic front in supporting the Western Balkans' path to membership. This includes offering more direct support to pro-European forces within these countries and ensuring that the

enlargement process is not just rhetorical but backed by concrete actions and consistent follow-through.

There is also a call for the EU to be more decisive and consistent in its approach to enlargement, with some suggesting that the EU should adopt a staged integration process that offers candidate countries earlier involvement in EU institutions. Maintaining the current pace of the enlargement process does not work to EU's benefit in the global context. The Western Balkan liberal leaders see as crucial both internal political will and a more coordinated and enthusiastic EU strategy for accelerating the enlargement process.

Keeping the hopes high

Asked whether "soon" EU enlargement is realistic, when and with whom, the Western Balkan liberal leaders express cautious optimism about EU enlargement by 2030, sharing the enthusiasm of the outgoing EU Council President Charles Michel. They believe that with strong commitment, both within the EU and their respective countries, it is possible for the Western Balkans and possibly Ukraine to join the EU by 2030. Naturally, their views on the process and timeline vary.

Memli Krasniqi from Kosovo is less optimistic about the current prospects but believes that with "strong commitment in the EU and, in Kosovo's case, with a PDK-led Government," 2030 could be a realistic target for Western Balkans countries, including Kosovo. Serbia's Pavle Grbović shares a more hopeful view, stating that he believes "all the countries of the Western Balkans will become EU members by 2030," potentially alongside Ukraine. Monika Zajkova of the Macedonian liberals emphasizes the need for the EU to maintain enlargement as a high priority, suggesting that "in due time there may be enlargement in a larger package," which could include both the Western Balkans and countries like Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, ensuring none are left behind as a "buffer zone."

Vatroslav Belan advocates for a "regatta" approach rather than a package deal, arguing that Montenegro, having advanced further than its neighbors, should not be held back. He stresses that "Montenegro should not

be a victim of the eventual regression of the Western Balkans in the accession process," and expresses hope that his native Montenegro could become an EU member by the end of the decade if both sides work diligently. Similarly, Bosnia's Minister Edin Forto believes that while the entire Western Balkans region should aim for EU membership around 2030, "Montenegro has a chance" to join sooner, given its smaller size, NATO membership, and advanced status in negotiations. He underscores that 2030 should serve as a "big push" to ensure enlargement becomes a success story for the region, although he notes that the exact year may vary.

Precious experience from the recent EU neighbors in the region

The liberals from the Western Balkans are part of a regional network where they coordinate their policies and approaches towards the EU accession. Meeting regularly in the margins of the gatherings of the European liberals they understood that only through sharing of know-how and ideas they can achieve their common European objectives faster. Learning from the experiences of the countries in the region that joined the EU during the enlargement in the beginning of the century is precious.

Roman Jakič, a former defense Minister of Slovenia who leads the regional liberal network LIBSEEN, offers a critical perspective on the EU enlargement process and its current status with Western Balkans countries. He asserts that the EU's inconsistent approach and failure to adhere to its promises have severely undermined the credibility of the enlargement process. The failure of the EU to materialize on its promises has emboldened anti-EU forces within the Western Balkans, thereby impeding progress.

Jakič contends that the EU has been paralyzed by internal political issues, the latest being the European elections and the formation of the new European Commission. Missing the historic moment to speed up the process of accepting the candidate countries leads to increased Russian influence in the region. A proactive stance from the EU to fill in the vacuum that is created and push away the malign influence of Russia and its proxies in the region.

To improve the process, Jakič proposes several changes. He suggests focusing on one or two EU member states to act as sponsors for candidate countries, which would involve these states in advocating and pushing for the accession of the Western Balkans based on the positive experiences from the previous EU enlargement. He also recommends that candidate countries should adopt EU standards not just to meet conditions but as a genuine aspiration for alignment with EU norms: “Strengthen those negotiation teams and quickly reform their legislation, not in the sense of ‘we have to because the EU asks us to,’ but ‘we have to because we want to approach EU standards as a whole.’”

Despite his criticism, Jakič remains optimistic about the potential for EU enlargement, especially with the appointment of new EU Foreign Affairs Chief Kaja Kallas who herself comes from a small country that joined the Union this century, though he has reservations about the immediate prospects. He views Montenegro as the most advanced candidate, noting its significant progress with several negotiation chapters open and some already closed. However, he expresses skepticism about Montenegro’s current government, stating, “I am a bit skeptical... because this new government in Montenegro, like the previous one, were only verbally strong about how they would reform their system and adapt to the conditions set by the EU.”

Jakič considers Albania as a promising candidate due to its relative internal stability and lack of Russian influence, suggesting that “sooner or later Albania will be ahead of everyone.” In contrast, he is uncertain about Serbia’s commitment to EU membership, remarking that the country’s focus on economic resources like lithium might overshadow genuine political will. He notes, “It seems as if Vucic wants it, the EU will do it because of the lithium and raw materials... but I am not sure that the authorities in Belgrade really want to become a full member of the EU.”

Regarding North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, Jakič is cautious. He mentions that the new Macedonian government’s direction is unclear, and he is critical of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s complex internal issues, particularly “Republic of Srpska and Dodik’s disagreement with EU membership,” due to fear of prosecution for their corrupt behavior, which he views as a significant barrier to progress.

A Phased Approach to EU Enlargement: A Recipe for Success

The current approach of EU enlargement is barely sustainable in the current geopolitical context and the national realities. Membership remains a distant goal for many, and people in the region need to see tangible benefits soon to prevent further disillusionment and increased influence from Russia, China, and autocratic regimes. To accelerate this process, a staged or phased integration approach could be a strategic solution.

The European Liberal Forum (ELF) has long advocated for a phased integration model. This approach involves gradually integrating candidate countries into various EU policies and institutions, culminating in full membership. By breaking down the accession process into smaller, manageable steps, this model offers several advantages.

This integration approach, as detailed in Dr. Antonios Nestoras explains in ELF’s “Renewing Europe: A How-to-Guide for EU Policy Makers”, offers a pragmatic solution to the challenges of EU enlargement. By providing tangible benefits at each stage of the process, the EU can maintain momentum and public support for integration, especially in a region where disillusionment with the EU is growing.

The phased integration approach can counter this by offering immediate benefits, such as increased access to EU funds, participation in EU programs, and closer cooperation on specific policy areas.

The phased integration model should be flexible enough to adapt to the specific needs and circumstances of each candidate country, alongside with the much-needed internal reforms in the EU. Both the EU and the candidate countries must demonstrate strong political will to make the phased integration model a success, requiring a commitment to reform, good governance, and democratic principles.

While the European Commission has not formally endorsed the staged integration approach, it has developed the “Growth Plan for the Western Balkans” which implicitly applies similar principles. Next to its implementation, building public support for EU integration in both the EU and

candidate countries is crucial. Effective communication and engagement with civil society will help foster understanding and support.

By demonstrating tangible progress and addressing the immediate concerns of citizens in the Western Balkans, the EU can regain trust and credibility. This, in turn, can strengthen the EU's geopolitical position, counter the influence of Russia and China, and promote stability and prosperity in the region.

The future of the Western Balkans and the EU's role in shaping it depend on a bold and decisive approach to enlargement. As indicated by some of the Western Balkan liberal leaders, indeed the phased integration model offers a promising path forward.

With joint efforts EU membership is achievable

Across the Western Balkans, there is a shared recognition of the importance of EU integration, both for the individual countries and for the region. However, the path to EU membership is fraught with obstacles, including internal political challenges, unresolved bilateral disputes, and external influences, particularly from Russia. The short-term prospects for significant progress in EU enlargement appear limited, with much depending on political developments both within the candidate countries and within the EU itself.

In the medium term, there is cautious optimism among the leaders of the Western Balkan liberals that new leadership and a renewed focus on enlargement could accelerate the integration process, especially if the EU takes a more decisive and supportive role. The overarching sentiment among them is that while the desire for EU membership remains strong, the process requires a more concerted effort and clearer commitment from both the candidate countries and the EU to overcome the current impasses and move towards a shared European future.

The WB6 liberal leaders are unequivocal in their belief that supporting their countries' efforts to implement necessary reforms and meet EU accession criteria, the EU can not only strengthen its own position but also contribute to the long-term security and prosperity of the entire continent.

In conclusion, the positions of Western Balkan liberal leaders on EU enlargement have been reinforced by the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. These leaders have seized this opportunity to advocate for accelerated EU accession processes, emphasizing the benefits that EU membership can bring to both the Western Balkans and the EU as a whole. By supporting these countries' efforts to meet EU accession criteria and transform themselves into functional liberal democracies, the EU can contribute to a more stable, prosperous, and integrated Europe for all.

Quotes:

"In the last couple of years, the Kosovo - EU relations have been reduced to facilitation of the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue. I do believe that we need a reset of relations between Kosovo and EU. Both in terms of the dialogue with Serbia, but also in terms of serving the larger agenda of enlargement."

"We don't need to wait for the full membership as it is understood today. Concrete steps can pave the way for full integration. Integration in the common market, participation in the EU institutions, be it as observers only, could provide incentives for faster progress."

Memli Krasniqi

"EU can no longer allow itself double standards. We faced blockades on the EU road to matters unrelated to the Copenhagen membership criteria. The EU needs to clearly say it wants these countries inside or it will leave them under the influence of other powers."

"To accelerate the accession, the best is to put the candidate countries in a package and offer a staged enlargement that will allow them to participate in the EU institutions without right to vote or possibility of election until full membership is achieved."

Monika Zajkova

"I see this period until the end of this decade as the last chance for the region to join the EU and thereby shatter any destructive dreams for it to remain in the interest zones of the Eastern dictatorships and authoritarian regimes of the underdeveloped world."

"In Montenegro's government and parliamentary majority, we have a strong influence of entities that are ideologically pro-Russian, and fundamentally anti-Western, anti-European, anti-NATO. The EU must be crystal clear that a double game is not possible."

Vatroslav Belan

"Clear that majority of citizens want EU accession and they want Bosnia and Herzegovina to deliver better in this process. We need to listen to the people and build consensus in being more proactive in achieving EU membership criteria and demands."

"Bosnia together with the other Western Balkan countries would have a

realistic chance to join the EU around 2030. Perhaps not exactly that year, but that goal should serve as a big impetus to turn the enlargement into a success story for everyone"

Edin Forto

"After the 24th of February, 2022 the awareness has matured that the issue of collective security cannot be adequately resolved if the Western Balkans are not fully integrated into the European political space. I believe that this strategic determination will not change."

"Serbia has a good opportunity to jump over several steps on which it got stuck due to serious deficiencies regarding the rule of law, but it is not happening because the government has neither the courage nor the knowledge to implement the necessary reforms."

Pavle Grbović

"We have all had our own sponsor in some way. Slovenia and Croatia had Germany, the Baltic states had Scandinavian states, so for the region, we need one or two member states to ask them to be sponsors, promoters, pushers of candidate countries to become members of the European Union."

"I'm glad that Kaja Kallas has taken a big and important position regarding as EU's foreign chief. As a representative of a small country she will understand that this enlargement void needs to be filled, so that the Russian influence in the Western Balkans is thrown out."

Roman Jakič

EU Mentorship task force: party membership & civil society approach to EU

Nejra Vreto-Milić
Bosnia and Herzegovina



CHAPTER 3

Chapter 3

EU Mentorship task force: party membership & civil society approach to EU

Nejra Vreto-Milić

Disclaimer: This report is based on the opinions of the EU Mentorship participants and authors of the report. This report does not reflect the opinions of the leading organization European Liberal Forum, implementing organization Boris Divkovic Foundation and IDI Stichting.

EU Mentorship Program and its success

EU Mentorship program is an ongoing task force encompassing the range of different EU policies and agendas, aiming to connect liberal officials and representatives from the Western Balkans countries on the same goal - EU enlargement. The program has been ongoing for six years and has represented a series of very interactive trainings, workshops, and policies

which led to significant influence on shaping the course of actions of EU officials towards the Western Balkans countries and their path towards the European Union. We have had representatives from Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia, who have been elected officials, councilors, MPs but also policy experts on behalf of different NGOs that are party-affiliated.

However, since 2021 Western Balkans countries and Eastern Partnership countries have joined forces in making a unique pro-European liberal standpoint in representing their ideas towards the joint European future and stronger European Union. We have had participants from Ukraine, Georgia and Armenia give their EaP perspectives that expanded the scope of EU Mentorship Program and its influence within the EU institutions, all with the help and support of European Liberal Forum and European Parliament.

When looking into the past and what has been done - the EU Mentorship program produced a number of Reverse reports, where liberal representatives have written reports back to the European Commission on how they see their countries develop and what needs to be done. This helped them gain skills and experience in transforming their party policies towards the EU agenda, as well as build up on the advocacy approach and lobbying in various EU channels - which is the heart of the closed EU circle.

Besides the Reverse reports, Letters to MEPs were introduced as another tool of reaching

Western Balkans countries and Eastern Partnership countries have joined forces in making a unique pro-European liberal standpoint in representing their ideas towards the joint European future and stronger European Union

out to EU officials and presenting them with the inside stories of liberals in their countries as well as leading opposition plans for the EU enlargement, which they can jointly address and lobby in front of the MEPs for the potential policy changes.

As a result, after six generations of this program, we have witnessed growth within the liberal families and political parties, as well as the civil society approach which has been reserved to its extent towards public opinion and the Brussels bubble. Their viewpoints have been expanded towards the closer EU integration process, while, in the meantime, working on their internal processes such as economic and political reforms, visa liberalization, rule of law, and anti-corruption measures.

It is important to highlight that they seek to fulfill the common goal of Western Balkans' modernization, economic prosperity, and social reforms which can be found within the European Union framework, only by continuous support and effort of constant negotiations and ways of fulfilling the EU criteria.

Nevertheless, civil society organizations have been playing a huge role in the alignment of all criteria and pushing on the political will and necessary reforms, while engaging the public opinion and researching on their standpoints towards the EU integration process. We can generally state that public opinion has been quite positive and open-minded towards certain changes and the government's proposals on reforms, while highlighting the benefits of EU enlargement.

This has been seen through many campaigns all across the Western Balkans countries, within liberal networks, on how they develop interactive prospects, especially about engaging youth and educating them about their role in shaping the EU narrative.

The participants find this particularly important for the regional promoters of European values, as they find their current governments most responsible for not delivering on reforms required for EU membership. They also feel that their diplomatic networks are underdeveloped as they lack skills for leading substantial negotiations with the EU and its member states. Also, the corruption seems to be the main motive for this underperformance. Unhappy with the progress results of EU delegations

on the ground, some citizens still feel there is a shared responsibility for the potential further decay of EU credibility influence in the region.¹

They view the relationship between the EU membership and key reforms are aimed at the rule of law and democracy as a two-way street. These reforms are not only necessary for the commencement of the enlargement and its evolvement, but also to defend EU values and preserve their accomplishments. Compared to the previous two reports, the skepticism for the enlargement taking place within the next decade has grown. On the other hand, this has not influenced their general perception of the EU as the participants recognize it as a guarantor of regional stability and its value promotor.²

EU Mentorship task force: liberal perspectives of Western Balkans officials

EU Mentorship alumni, liberal representative of the Free Citizens Movement from Serbia, Aleksandar Radovanović, made an interesting comparison between the countries of Western Balkans and their current position on the EU agenda, and gave us some valuable insights into Serbia's current circumstances.

At the end of the eighties, there was a popular comedy play "Long Journey to Europe", set in the Montenegrin court of King Nikola, in which a beauty is chosen for the world exhibition in London to present the country as beautifully as possible, while a showdown with political opponents takes place at the court itself.

This title and the plot of the play best illustrate the integration of the countries of the Western Balkans, and especially Serbia, into the European Union. There was hope among us Euro enthusiasts that integration would accelerate after Russia's aggression against Ukraine at the beginning of

1 We are Europe III: A Liberal Perspective on the EU's Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy <https://bdf.ba/v2/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/We-are-Europe-III-A-Liberal-Perspective-on-EUs-Enlargement-and-Neighbourhood-Policy.pdf>

2 Ibid.

2022, primarily due to Europe's need to round off its security space - however now, after two years, it is more than clear that this will not happen.

Aleksandar Vučić has coined a phrase that "Serbia is on the European path", thereby buying peace with half of the electorate who are in favor of Serbia's entry into the European Union, but also with European partners, for whom this is a signal that, despite everything else, he has not completely turned to Moscow and Putin. On the other hand, all reforms have been completely stopped, and the reports of the European Commission are identical from year to year.

There is no will in Serbia to take steps in the key areas of the rule of law and media freedom because this would undermine the power pyramid of the autocratic regime of Aleksandar Vučić, which is increasingly becoming a personal dictatorship. On the other hand, this type of action is also favored by the attitude of the leaders of the European Union, who are not too interested in the Western Balkans, except in situations where the hard-established peace has been violated, such as last year's conflict in Banjska in Kosovo.

North Macedonia was supposed to become a model for other Western Balkan countries to follow in European integration, but due to unresolved identity and national issues with Greece and Bulgaria, that opportunity was missed and now with the change of government and the return of VMRO, everything is practically starting from scratch. Now, Montenegro is moving faster than the others, but the question is whether the government will have real, and not just nominal, support from all majority parties for accelerated reforms and severe cuts.

It has been shown that, in order to accelerate the European integration of the Western Balkans, it is not enough to negotiate with governments and hold occasional conferences, but an impulse from Brussels is needed, which will clearly determine the steps by which each country becomes a member and the consequences if these steps are not fulfilled. Without it, the "Long Journey to Europe" of the Western Balkans will last at least another decade.

Similar opinion is stated by Aleksandar's party colleague, EU Mentorship alumni and former member of National Assembly of Serbia, Natan Albahari.

While Serbia is formally on the path towards European Union membership, in reality that process is frozen or going in reverse. Serbia has not opened any new chapters or clusters since the end of 2021 and there are no indications that Brussels or Member States are ready to move forward on that issue. President Vucic and his nationalist Serbian Progressive Party have done nothing on fundamental values; in fact, they were instrumental in Serbia's democratic backsliding, most clearly seen in irregularities and theft of national and local elections in December 2023, which was confirmed by OSCE, the European Parliament and various civil society and watchdog organizations that were following the elections. In the meantime, there were no improvements of electoral conditions, no improvement in the freedom of media, no improvement in the rule of law.

Another major area of contention is foreign policy and Serbia's refusal to align with Europe on the most important foreign and security question of this century - the Russian invasion of Ukraine. President Vučić has been adamant in his stance, that Serbia will never apply sanctions on Russia, even if that means no EU membership. For months (and with some even to this day) the main pro-government propaganda channels, including the public broadcaster, spewed pro-Kremlin talking points, even accusing Ukraine of starting the war and invading Russia.

Such stances and rhetoric were shared by all government officials and governing parliamentarians, at one point even reducing Serbia's CFSP alignment rate to fall below 50%. Albeit that, Serbia has voted against or abstained from the most major UN resolutions on Ukraine, and now secretly/unofficially supplies Ukraine with weapons and ammunition. However, its rhetoric standpoint continues to be pro-Russian and a major concern in most EU capitals.

These are only the major issues that at the moment show that this government is not interested in actually pursuing a pro-European agenda and foreign policy. Not to mention Kosovo/Banjska, strategic relations with China, staggering levels of corruption, and continued degradation of

regional relations, only further demonstrates that Serbia is moving further away instead of moving closer to the EU. As opposed to some of Serbia's neighbors, such as Montenegro, which have taken a decisively pro-European stance and are backing rhetoric with positive steps, and have a clear shot of joining the European Union by the end of the decade; Serbia's perspectives are diminishing on a daily basis.

More positive perspective can be seen through the lenses of EU Mentorship alumni from Bosnia and Herzegovina: Anes Hodžić and Mirela Džehverović.

Anes says that it is significant to underline that the country has experienced a stalemate in the process of European integration. After the end of the war, the country rapidly changed for the better until 2006 when an all-encompassing package of constitutional amendments was voted down by the Parliamentary Assembly. In the following 15 years, little to no progress has been made and Bosnia and Herzegovina transformed from one of the leaders of the European integrations in the region to the country that was dead last in the region in this process.

However, with the change of government at the state and federal levels, we can see that things are slowly moving in a good direction. The country opened the negotiation talks with the European Union in record time and is constantly working on adopting the standards of the European Union in its national legislation.

Albeit, this process is going to take a while. Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the region of Western Balkans as a whole, is still not fully prepared to be members of the European Union.

Although it is quite clear that most of the countries in the region are trying to accomplish all of the tasks put in front of them, there needs to be strong and undoubted support for the reforms by the European Union as well as a visible commitment to accept Western Balkan countries as members of the European Union in a realistic timeframe. Without that, the citizens of these countries will simply get tired of empty promises and the overwhelming support for the European Union that currently exists will transform into fatigue.

The integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) into the European Union (EU) represents a complex and multi-layered process which brings numerous advantages with it, but also challenges, says Mirela. As a citizen of BiH, with a professional insight into political-economic conditions, she believes that this step could have a significant impact on the unpredictable future.

Politically, integration would bring stability through the adoption of European norms and values. Strengthening the rule of law, the fight against corruption and the reform of public administration are just some of the aspects that would have to be improved. European integration would also contribute to the strengthening of democratic institutions and transparency in the work of the government, which is crucial for building citizens' trust in institutions.

One of the key advantages of BiH's integration into the EU are economic stability and prosperity. Access to European funds would enable the implementation of infrastructure projects and the improvement of public services. However, the complexity of the political system in BiH, with its division into entities and cantons, makes it difficult to adopt needed changes and implement the necessary reforms. Also, bureaucratic obstacles and political instability can slow down the access process. Bosnia and Herzegovina was granted candidacy status in late 2022 and it is seen as a geo-strategic decision made due to the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine and fear of a growing Russian influence in the region. However, this was not just based on fear, but also on the narratives of the political garniture in the country and the region of the Western Balkans that pushed Bosnia and Herzegovina onto the EU agenda once again. Its fragmentation and vulnerability to dangerous consequences were additional reasons.³

Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said: "Since we granted the candidate status, Bosnia and Herzegovina has taken impressive steps forward. More progress has been achieved in just over a year than in over a decade. Of course, more progress is necessary to join our Union. But the country is showing that it can deliver on the membership criteria, and on

³ Putin's Europe - Unveiling the Shadow - Russian Influence in the Western Balkans via Informal Networks and Civil Society Organizations <https://liberalforum.eu/publication/putins-europe/>

its citizens' aspiration to be part of our family," von der Leyen added. "The future of Bosnia and Herzegovina lies in our Union."⁴

The integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina into the EU represents a path towards modernization and progress, but it requires strategic planning, political will and willingness to compromise.

Benefits in the form of economic growth, political stability and improvement of living standards are significant, but it is necessary to be aware of the challenges that this process carries. As a citizen who is politically active, Mirela believes that the key to success is inclusiveness, transparency and continuous communication with citizens in order to ensure their support and understanding for this important step.

Although strongly supported in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the gap between support to joining the EU between two entities is growing. While support is almost 90% in a Bosniak/Croatian-majority entity, it hardly reaches 55% in a Serb-majority entity. Although support is still high across the country, the survey has found decline for support compared to the previous survey from 2021.⁵

Sabina Ćudić, EU Mentorship Alumni has been appointed as the vice-president of European liberals in the Council of Europe, at the beginning of 2024.

She said she was extremely pleased that her work within the Council of Europe and the European Liberals was recognized at that level after less than a year, and that she was invited and encouraged to run for the leadership of the Liberals in the Council of Europe, where she received unanimous support together with the other members of the new leadership.

A progressive voice from Bosnia and Herzegovina in international

⁴ Putin's Europe - Unveiling the Shadow - Russian Influence in the Western Balkans via Informal Networks and Civil Society Organizations <https://liberalforum.eu/publication/putins-europe/>

⁵ Direkcija za evropske integracije (2022). Stavovi građana o članstvu u Evropskoj uniji i procesu integracija u EU. https://www.dei.gov.ba/uploads/documents/ijm-2022_1664197423.pdf.

institutions is extremely important for our country at this moment. Her election as vice president is proof that European liberals, as before, stand strongly by BiH. In cooperation with the liberal leadership, Sabina will continue to lobby even more strongly for Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁶

Another perspective comes from EU Mentorship alumni Luka Nikolić from LDP Montenegro.

He says that Montenegro is facing possibly the biggest challenge so far. Away from Donald Trump's joke about Montenegrin people starting the Third World War, the country must once again reconsider its goals and strategic orientation. Political elites are eager to reassure the population about a bright and quick trip to the family of the European Union, but the reality is somewhat different.

The fact is that Montenegro has become a member of the NATO alliance and it represents great motivation for going further in European integration.

Moreover, Montenegro has been repeatedly described as the regional leader in the process, boosting economic and political cooperation with the EU. Nevertheless, an array of external factors show that Montenegro has been open to foreign malign influence, culminating with a Russian coup attempt in 2016 and a hawkish arrangement with China to build the country's only highway.

⁶ <https://n1info.ba/vijesti/sabina-cudic-imenovana-za-potpreds-jednicu-evropskih-liberala-u-vijecu-evrope/>

The integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina into the EU represents a path towards modernization and progress

With the time passing by, it is clear that political elites have not been able to completely persuade population in the importance of European integrations. Support for EU integration in Montenegro was very high since country regained independence in 2006., but in last couple of years it went down significantly. Last data says that around 50% of people are in favor of joining the EU. We can enlist various reasons for that. In the beginning, strong right-wing Serbian nationalist positions (political parties, Serbian orthodox church, Russia-backed media, direct interference of Serbian government in political affairs) still present in Montenegro dictate resistance towards any kind of shared European values.

Moreover, enlargement fatigue or lack of recognition for reforms made in the country certainly gave additional motivation for the population to look at EU integration as a geostrategic, rather than transitional political process. In the end, the EU as well as other supranational institutions have its inner vital problems which require full attention to finding solutions, rather than accepting new countries as members.

Therefore, as Euro-optimists we must pay close attention on how to motivate people to regain trust in the EU, bearing in mind that it is the process which demands thorough engagement both from the whole of Montenegrin society and European leaders to advice, improving and supporting legitimate reforms.

Coming from both, leadership response and as an EU Mentorship alumnus, Monika Zajkova from North Macedonia shares her perception on the EU integration process and momentum in the Western Balkan countries.

She believes that the enlargement process is going too slowly with regards to certain candidate countries. With such dynamics of the process, a large part of the candidates lose their enthusiasm, and the population becomes skeptical that this enlargement will ever happen. People begin to think about new alternatives. Given geopolitics, that is, geographical/geopolitical developments, it is necessary to seriously consider where the Union will be positioned in the next couple of years. As it is mentioned in the section below, about the potential

recommendations for the enhancement of EU general knowledge and path towards it, Monika says that there is a lack of monitoring of the countries after their full membership. At the same time, perhaps the Union should introduce all the candidates in a package in the form of a phased enlargement and, through monitoring, accelerate their reform process, and eventually grant them full membership.

We saw that EU optimism and/or skepticism has been increasing in some Western Balkan countries, Monika says that EU skepticism in Macedonia has actually decreased, or the EU optimism has improved. Given the start of bilateral screening when administration representatives from different institutions had the opportunity to cooperate with their peers from EU institutions and thus people saw the process moving forward through direct involvement in something that was almost unimaginable to them. Looking at the countries of the Western Balkans, she thinks that the most appropriate model is a package for simultaneous enlargement with all 6 in order to avoid bilateral blockades.

Recommendations:

Some of the recommendations our participants have for the enhancement of EU general knowledge within the Western Balkans and liberal political parties are the following:

Enhancing the quality and accessibility of education/training: Liberal principles, liberal ideas, and the liberal political agenda, as well as an understanding of how liberal political forces in the European Union view the Western Balkans and its relations with the Union, are not easily accessible. Beyond basic coverage of these topics in academia and formal education at universities, the region is largely unfamiliar with the liberal approach to the Balkans. This highlights the need to develop a curriculum that can be applied to work with civil society, academia, students, as well as liberal political parties and civil society organizations in the region.

More digital engagement and promotion of liberal standpoints of WB representatives: liberal political ideas often do not gain sufficient coverage in the mainstream media in the Western Balkans. In addition to the political reality on the ground, where liberal political parties are often small and their positions are often absorbed by larger coalition partners, there is a need to make liberal viewpoints more visible and easier for the general public to understand. Political stances are often complex and challenging to communicate using the language that resonates with mainstream audiences and media. A better understanding of the power of digitalization to make political ideas more visible, particularly in explaining political positions to different age groups, could help make liberal political parties more visible and accessible to a wider audience.

More partnership of different liberal NGOs across WB: Liberal civil society organizations in the region, along with liberal "friendly" organizations, are often small, understaffed, and heavily constrained in their ability to receive support for action on the ground. On the other hand, these organizations frequently operate in a politically unwelcoming environment, controlled by political parties with authoritarian leanings. The question of partnership among different liberal civil society

organizations should be prioritized, with strong support from the European Liberal Forum, which has a long history of supporting and collaborating with regional liberal civil society groups. This could provide a strong foundation for promoting shared liberal values and, in the long term, developing a potentially formal initiative for cooperation among liberal civil society organizations in the Western Balkans, under one liberal umbrella. Such cooperation could lead to the creation of a common regional strategy to create a more liberal region.

Promoting cross-border cooperation within ELF network: Building on the previous recommendations for strengthening partnerships among liberal civil society forces in the region, the promotion of cross-border cooperation could enhance understanding between civil society organizations and political forces. Although these groups share a common liberal idea, they often operate in societies that are deeply divided, where cross-border cooperation is frequently seen as a sign of weakness rather than strength. Therefore, cross-border cooperation should be prioritized by all liberal political forces in the Western Balkans as a strategy for addressing the long history of divisiveness and animosity that has characterized the region. By working together across borders, these forces can contribute to healing divides and creating a more cohesive and liberal future for the Balkans.

Enhancing the capacity for monitoring and evaluation of EU strategies: EU strategies are often complex, confusing, and difficult to understand, even for experts. The European Union faces challenges in effectively communicating its relevance to the region. Just as regional decision-makers should be held accountable, the same expectations should apply to the European Union. Political parties in the Western Balkans often fail to deliver on their promises, and a similar critique can be made of the EU's commitments. To better understand how EU strategies impact the region, both in the short and long term, there is a need to develop a matrix that clarifies how the European Union formulates its strategies for the Western Balkans and how these strategies contribute to bringing the region closer to the Union. This would provide greater transparency and help both political forces and the general public better understand the EU's role and impact in the region.

More collaboration of WB officials with EU institutions and EU officials:

In line with the staged integration approach promoted by the European Liberal Forum, greater effort is needed from all sides to create stronger connections between relevant stakeholders, both within the European Union and the Western Balkans. In addition to providing space for meaningful dialogue between the two sides, enhanced collaboration between Western Balkan officials and EU institutions will help foster a sense of expectancy: leaders from the Western Balkans will understand that there is an expectation to deliver the necessary reforms to bring the region closer to the European Union, while EU institutions will make their promises of a future where Western Balkan nations join the Union more realistic.

Quotes:

"It has been shown that, in order to accelerate the European integration of the Western Balkans, it is not enough to negotiate with governments and hold occasional conferences, but an impulse from Brussels is crucial."

Aleksadar Radovanović

"As opposed to some of Serbia's neighbors, like Montenegro, which have taken a decisively pro-European stance and are backing rhetoric with positive steps, and have a clear shot of joining the European Union by the end of the decade, Serbia's perspectives are diminishing on a daily basis."

Natan Albahari

"In the following 15 years, little to no progress has been made and Bosnia and Herzegovina transformed from one of the leaders of the European integrations in the region to the country that was dead last in the region in this process. "

Anes Hodžić

"One of the key advantages of BiH's integration into the EU are economic stability and prosperity. Access to European funds would enable the implementation of infrastructure projects and the improvement of public services."

Mirela Džehverović

"As Euro-optimists we must pay close attention on how to motivate people to regain trust in the EU, bearing in mind that it is the process which demands thorough engagement both from the whole of Montenegrin society and European leaders to advice, improve and support legitimate reforms."

Luka Nikolić

"I want to remain optimistic that Macedonia will soon start the negotiation process and achieve certain reforms in key areas. My personal views are that Macedonia has a real chance of becoming a full member of the Union by 2030."

Monika Zajkova

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We are Europe III: A Liberal Perspective on the EU's Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy <https://bdf.ba/v2/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/We-are-Europe-III-A-Liberal-Perspective-on-EUs-Enlargement-and-Neighbourhood-Policy.pdf>

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About authors:

Alen Gudalo

Alen Gudalo has long experience in managing and implementing projects focused on Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU integration, political responsibility, and youth engagement in politics. He currently coordinates the Initiative for monitoring the EU integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Previously, Alen led various activities at the Boris Divkovic Foundation, including the Academy of Political Responsibility and the Progressive Politics in the Western Balkans programme. His experience also includes activities related to community development, intercultural dialogue, and regional cooperation.

In collaboration with the European Liberal Forum, Alen contributed to the development of the publication "Putin's Europe", in which he discussed Russia's malign influence in both formal and informal civil society organizations in the Western Balkans.

Alen holds a Master's degree in International Relations and Diplomacy.

Nejra Vreto

Nejra Vreto-Milić was born in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. She graduated with a Social and Political Science degree at the International University of Sarajevo and later pursued a Master's degree in Democracy and Human Rights at the University of Bologna, Italy. For the past seven years, she has worked in various Foundations and has developed educational activities for youth and women in Bosnia & Herzegovina and the wider Western Balkans region. She is currently working as a BiH Director of Jericho Foundation working with marginalized youth of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Emil Kirjas

Emil Kirjas is an expert in geopolitics and international relations with a distinguished career in government, international organizations, and

strategic consulting. As former State Secretary for Foreign Affairs of North Macedonia, he brings a deep understanding of geopolitical realities, international relations, and the complexities of EU enlargement. Throughout his career, Kirjas has honed his expertise in areas such as political communication, campaign strategy, risk assessment, and crisis management. He has served for over a decade as Secretary General of Liberal Intentional and worked at prominent international organizations, including the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom. Recognized for his insightful geopolitical analysis and strategic acumen, Kirjas is a sought-after advisor to heads of state and government. He holds a Master's Degree in Geopolitics from King's College London.

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