



Centre for Southeast European Studies
Zentrum für Südosteuropastudien

European Fund for the Balkans

Policy Brief
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Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group

**KEEPING REFORMS ON TRACK:
POLICY BRIEF FOR THE COUNTRIES OF
THE BALKANS**

Keeping Reforms on Track: Policy Brief for the Countries of the Balkans

In recent years, the European Union has experienced one of its most serious crises. The multiple financial, political, economic and social crises compounded by the Union's struggle to find an adequate common response seriously jeopardized the European project.

The election to the European Parliament and the new Commission will bring some incentives to reconsider the current structure and policies of the EU and propose reforms. While the crisis is not over yet, some signs of economic recovery are visible across the continent, but it is not clear whether this will be sustained. Unemployment and poverty remain high in many EU member states. The crisis also led many EU citizens to oppose enlargement, often based on fears that further expansion would lead to migration and that new members would cost EU citizens too much.

Considering this state of affairs, it might be tempting to doubt the merits of EU accession or pursue membership with greater speed or enthusiasm. The EU will undoubtedly change and reform itself but it will not lose its relevance for the Balkans. The member states will remain the main trading partner of all countries in the region for the foreseeable future. In a post-crisis EU, EU citizens are likely to be less reserved than they are today about enlargement and politicians in the member states will find it easier to lobby for enlargement. All Balkan countries will join a very different EU from today's, and most likely for the better.

Alternatives to EU integration are illusionary. Ideas for the Balkan countries to join the European Free Trade Agreement (EFTA) or enter some other free trade regime with the EU, short of full membership, are not just unrealistic but also less appealing as they entail obligations without the benefits of financial assistance or decision-making influence. Likewise, other countries might be attractive economic and political allies for the Balkan countries, from the United Arab Emirates and China afar to Russia and Turkey in closer proximity. However, they cannot offer the same level of economic and political integration as the EU, nor are such relations based on similarly stable foundations, and are thus more likely to be volatile.

Accession to the EU also remains a unique instrument to continue to transform the political systems of the Balkan countries that would otherwise remain unreformed. The integration process itself is transformative and fundamentally important for all countries of the region. Other models of economic growth and political stability are usually based on strategies that put a high premium on factors that are not available in the Balkans, such as large supplies of natural resources or large economies with cheap labour, and have less respect for democracy and the rule of law. Thus, such strategies are either impossible or will have serious shortcomings limiting its long-term sustainability. In order for enlargement to continue and succeed, reforms have to be taken seriously; merely ticking boxes no longer suffices. The accession process needs to be understood not just as a means to joining an exclusive club, but rather as a unique opportunity to carry out comprehensive reforms.

The newly constituted EU institutions will be a window of opportunity to move the completion of accession in the Balkans up on the EU agenda. If the countries of the region are able to articulate a clear commitment to accession and a vision for domestic reform, this can help change the dynamic of the process by demonstrating the seriousness of the country and re-connecting accession to reforms.

In order for accession to succeed, the countries of the Balkans need to convince not just the EU institutions but also, equally, the member states of the benefits of completing the enlargement to the Balkans. This requires confronting the fears and concerns about enlargement towards countries that experienced conflict during the 1990s. As such, enlargement is not just a technical process, but needs to be part of a new narrative on the purpose and function of EU enlargement domestically and in the EU: Completing the Balkan enlargement is about the EU as a peace project and a community of prosperous democracies.

Policy Recommendations

Taking Rule of Law Seriously. As the rule of law and the fight against corruption have become priorities of the accession process, political elites need to take these issues seriously. By taking energetic actions to fight high-level corruption political elites can prove that they are serious about reforms. Reforming the political and legal system requires not only commitment by governments, but also a wider political process that includes the political opposition and society at large.

Including Civil Society in the EU Integration Process. The broad inclusion of civil society in the accession process, both during or before negotiations, can help to build a broader constituency in favour of EU accession in the Balkan aspirants, and help to keep the negotiations on track when support for EU integration might otherwise dwindle.

Making use of Constructive Energies within Grassroots Social Movements. Social unrest and new social movement are increasingly shaping the picture of the Balkans (see Bosnian protests). There is a lot of positive and pro-EU energy in the grassroots social movements. Instead of repression and stigmatization an inclusive approach is needed. Some parts of social movements can become genuine partners on the way towards full membership in the EU.

Forging Support for Accession among Member States. As the EU accession process is increasingly shaped by member states and also their individual reservations about enlargement, having strong advocates among member states is crucial in order to keep accession on the agenda. Intensified lobbying and communication with enlargement supporters among member states can pave the way to a new “coalition of the willing” able to put enlargement higher on the EU agenda.

Taking Public Opinion in EU Member States Seriously. As politicians in member states are confronted with hostile public attitudes toward enlargement, the temptation is great to pander to these fears or at least to not push for an unpopular policy. It is thus important for accession states to take citizens in the EU seriously and communicate to them.

Finding a Common Regional Voice. Rather than just regional cooperation, the countries of the region need to find a common voice towards the EU. If the countries lobby jointly for an acceleration of EU integration and a more inclusive, yet competitive accession process, the EU and its member states are more likely to take notice.

Resolving Bilateral Disputes. Even minor bilateral disputes can cause major delays in the accession process as the EU is increasingly wary about “importing” problems within its borders. Thus the resolution of any outstanding issues is not just a means to avoid delays but also a sign of commitment on behalf of the Balkan countries to the EU integration project.

Considering the Contribution of the Balkans to the EU. The EU is based on shared laws, norms and rules. For member states to support enlargement, the benefits have to be visible beyond the technical adherence to shared rules by the Balkan aspirants. As such, the countries of the Balkans need to consider their contribution, the tangible and intangible benefits they bring to the EU. Here the countries need to re-frame accession not merely as a way to prevent future conflict in the Balkans, but also in positive terms.

About the Report

This Report was written by members of the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group and its contents were discussed at several meetings of the group in Graz (October 2013), Brussels (November 2013), Zagreb (January 2014) and Belgrade (February 2014). The primary contributors to this report are Florian Bieber, Marko Kmezić and for Scenario 1: Corina Stratulat; Scenario 2: Leon Malazogu; Scenario 3: Dimitar Bechev and Vedran Džihčić; Scenario 4: Dejan Jović.

About the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group

The Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG) is a co-operation project of the European Fund for the Balkans (EFB) and Centre for the Southeast European Studies of the University of Graz (CSEES) with the aim to promote the European integration of the Western Balkans and the consolidation of democratic, open countries in the region. BiEPAG is composed by young researchers from the Western Balkans and wider Europe that have established themselves for their knowledge and understanding of the Western Balkans and the processes that shape the region. Current members of the BiEPAG are: Florian Bieber, Arola Elbasani, Dimitar Bechev, Dejan Jović, Marko Kmezić, Nermin Oruč, Leon Malazogu, Corina Stratulat, Milan Nič, Marija Risteska, Nenad Koprivica, Nebojša Lazarević and Vedran Džihčić.

About the European Fund for the Balkans

The European Fund for the Balkans is a multi-year joint initiative of European Foundations including the Robert Bosch Stiftung, the King Baudouin Foundation, the Compagnia di San Paolo and the ERSTE Foundation. It is designed to undertake and support initiatives aimed at bringing the Western Balkans closer to the European Union through grant-giving and operational programmes. The Fund's objectives are: to encourage broader and stronger commitment to the European integration of the Western Balkan countries and societies; to strengthen the efforts undertaken by a range of stakeholders in this process also with a view to developing effective policies and practices in the region and in the EU; and to support the process of member state building as envisaged by the International Commission on the Balkans, in particular by building constituencies in the societies of Southeast Europe who will be offered an opportunity to experience and learn about Europe.

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About the Centre for Southeast European Studies, University of Graz

The Centre for Southeast European Studies was set up in November 2008 following the establishment of Southeast Europe as a strategic priority at the University of Graz in 2000. The Centre is an interdisciplinary and cross-faculty institution for research and education, established with the goal to provide space for the rich teaching and research activities at the university on and with Southeast Europe and to promote interdisciplinary collaboration. Since its establishment, the centre also aimed to provide information and documentation and to be a point of contact for media and the public interested in Southeast Europe, in terms of political, legal, economic and cultural developments. An interdisciplinary team of lawyers, historians, and political scientists working at the Centre has contributed to research on Southeast Europe, through numerous articles, monographs and other publications. In addition, the centre regularly organizes international conferences and workshops to promote cutting edge research on Southeast Europe.

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