

The Western Balkans in the European Union: New perspectives on integration?

Main findings of the Reflection Forum

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A need for (re-)new(ed) approaches from four intertwined perspectives

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1. A renewed vision for membership in the EU and the political will to create the impetus for accelerating the accession process is needed. A central question tackled was: why are leaders who do not pursue the path of democratisation and EU accession still in power? The EU is faced with two key challenges in this respect: first, how to craft a clear and feasible prioritisation agenda. The primary focus should be on improving the lives of citizens and on employment prospects in general (particularly for the youth). The EU's main instruments in this respect are its own successful policies, such as the cohesion policy and the free movement of labour. An extension of these instruments to candidate and potential candidate countries should be considered. The second challenge is how to identify change-makers in the Western Balkans and the wider world to partner with. The EU needs to invest more in finding and supporting legitimate and credible partners in the region. It should also work with actors from outside the region to increase its leverage. The US remains indispensable in this respect.
2. Clarity is needed over the nature of the Union which the Western Balkan countries are seeking to join. The core values and principles of the EU should be communicated more strongly, too. The financial and refugee crises, the rise of the extreme right, controversies about *Grexit* and *Brexit*, as well as the weak responses to the situation in Ukraine and in the southern

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Mediterranean, have all made the Union seem less appealing while giving the criteria for membership a sense of being a moving target. Will the political conditionality for accession still be valid and interpreted in the same way in three, five, or seven years' time? Will candidates be allowed to join once they fulfil the criteria – or will universal referenda in member states undermine the results of negotiations? Will candidates eventually join as equal members of the club? The open-ended nature of these questions is allowing domestic elites in candidate and potential candidate countries to divert from the pursuit of the accession agenda and to present allegedly safer alternative options to their electorates. From the EU's perspective, these alternatives represent a lack of progress or even backsliding in terms of good governance, rule of law and democratisation. The European Commission possesses the best mechanisms and instruments to clearly communicate to the candidate and potential candidate countries and to oversee coherence of the EU and the member states' approaches to the region. The accession agenda, foreign and security policy, economic integration, investments and relations within and with the region need to be coordinated so that they reinforce one other. The prospects of the whole region will improve as a result.

3. A more tangible vision for improving the socio-economic situation for the citizens of the candidate and potential candidate countries is needed. Hence there is a need to develop a vision in which the accession process is an essential part of the progress towards greater prosperity within a single generation. A vicious circle of bad governance – including ineffective administration and state-capture – demographic trends, (youth) unemployment, increasing costs of debt-servicing, and growing economic disparity requires a set of concerted

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efforts to be broken. Regional, functional and sectoral dimensions of cooperation need to be promoted. Building on the model of the European Energy Community, other EU common policies – including distributive policies (‘front loading’) could be extended to fully include the candidate and potential candidate countries. The bleak economic situation of the region 25 years after the countries embarked on the processes of transition, suggests that the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) is not enough. A proactive approach to a gradual inclusion of all countries of the Western Balkan into the EU’s free movement of labour should be considered, starting with the facilitation of seasonal and temporary legal labour migration, circular models of migration to facilitate mutual ‘brain gain’, and focusing on the young. In addition, scholarship programmes (for academic and vocational training; extending the Erasmus and Leonardo programmes, but also including intra-regional exchange programmes), would boost skills and employment opportunities, while also helping the reconciliation process. The rule of law is crucial for improving investments from diaspora communities, as well as for boosting the entrepreneurial spirit in the countries of the region. It should therefore be prioritised in the accession talks.

4. The changing geopolitical context means that an assessment, analysis and adaptation of enlargement, home affairs, foreign and security policies are required. There is no alternative to the Western Balkans eventually belonging in the EU. However, a number of externally induced socio-economic and political processes are leading to situations in which the necessary reforms (and thereby accession progress) are being threatened. The EU needs to confront the fact that it is increasingly portrayed as an importer of instability and problems to

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the region, as was the case with the economic and migration crises. A concerted effort is needed in assessing, understanding, and designing policy responses to various forms of radicalisation in the region, including but not limited to religious extremism. Acting in line with the new Global Strategy, the EU should champion its efforts in boosting societal and states' resilience to external shocks and internal instabilities in the region and partner with global, regional and local actors to ensure that it remains on the path to EU integration.

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