



Why the Western Balkans should join the EU immediately

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One could dare to claim that the Western Balkans (WB6) are in many ways part of the EU, because the two are much more than just intertwined and intricately connected territories. They share a common history and culture as well as geographical proximity and economic ties. Furthermore, they face mutual challenges including security and climate change. What is often overlooked is that the EU is literally surrounding the WB6, but has been keeping the countries in limbo for too long. Brussels should rather treat this weak flank of Europe as their inner courtyard instead of their backyard and integrate them immediately. Nevertheless, the member states seem to have been reluctant to pick up the pace. Since Croatia's accession on 1 July 2013, the doors appear closed to the Western Balkans. Many reasons are put forward for the obstinacy in delaying accessions, such as the important economic disparities or the weak rule of law. However, for the last two decades, the WB6 have demonstrated their eager readiness to join through concrete and tangible improvements. Despite their efforts to secure themselves a future in the EU, Brussels – or more precisely: member states – ultimately deter the project. It is time to take a clear stance and admit the WB6 without further delay.

State of play

For most of the countries in question, procedures were initiated in the early 2000s. Already in 2003, at the European Council summit in Thessaloniki, enlargement became an EU promise and hence a possibility for the WB6. Since then, North Macedonia (2005), Montenegro (2010), Serbia (2012) and Albania (2014) have become official candidates. Bosnia and Herzegovina applied (2016) but has not been granted candidate status. Five out of 27 EU member countries have not recognized Kosovo's declaration of independence of 2008 (Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia, Spain), thus making EU candidate status impossible.

The overall reorientation of all policies of the WB6 has since been evidence of their commitment to become members of the Union. The population of the region is generally in favour of becoming EU citizens. According to the *Balkan Opinion Barometer*, an annual survey of public opinion commissioned by the *Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)* in 2020, a majority (59%) of the WB6 population supports EU membership, with Albania (87%) topping the list. Moreover, governments have been demonstrating for years their desire for deeper cooperation with the EU. All non-EU Balkan countries are in the *Stabilization and Association Process (SAP)*, which aims to facilitate accession of potential and actual candidates. Additionally, they are members of the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA). Created by the Visegrad countries in the 1990s, the CEFTA partnership should ease and accelerate the economic integration of the WB6 ultimately leading to membership. However, CEFTA's actual ability to be an adequate preparatory exercise is often questioned. The countries gain a lot from it, but it should not be an end in itself.

Additional efforts are taken among the countries themselves through the establishment of the so-called Mini-Schengen initiative launched in 2019. This economic area between Serbia, Albania, North Macedonia and potentially Kosovo intends to enable freedom of movement across borders. In order to bring real added value, such initiatives need to be in line with the systematic efforts already undertaken under the auspices of RCC and CEFTA.

In any case, these legal instruments show that the EU's ambition for the Balkans is so far solely economic. While the economic integration has been continuing for almost two decades, the political integration is in fact not on the agenda. This is precisely the wrong direction for the EU to take. The new methodology for enlargement, which theoretically would tackle the aforementioned shortcomings, is so far practically limited to semantics.

Rediscover the momentum for the next logical step

Among the EU member states enthusiasm for yet another enlargement has waned over the past decade. This is amongst others a consequence of the multiple crises that have plagued the EU, especially Brexit. If Brussels keeps postponing the accessions, this slackening of enthusiasm could have a spillover effect on both regions. Although Croatia's accession had sent a positive signal for the rest of the region, the EU failed to keep up the momentum. This could even further weaken the WB6 trust in the EU and lead them to soften their efforts, while other players like the Russian Federation, China and also Turkey are increasing their influence and offer a viable alternative for cooperation and integration.

In addition, the EU sets the entry thresholds relatively high. It expects the WB6 to fulfil certain standards before proceeding with their application. Yet the way the so-called Copenhagen criteria are applied is often criticised. On the one hand, the EU asks the Balkans to meet unrealistic and non-pragmatic goals as well as makes the accession process even more complex. On the other hand, the Union requires its South-Eastern neighbours to comply with principles that its own members sometimes cannot meet either. Ultimately, it is not productive to assess each year in reports which criteria are still not met. The whole process is additionally flawed by the possibility for single member states to block any progress. North Macedonia had always been among the most reform-prone countries, but negotiations could not start due to the name dispute with Greece. This was finally resolved in 2019, but now the government in Sofia is vetoing any progress, insisting on certain interpretations of history and laying claim on the language spoken in North Macedonia.

There certainly are legitimate reasons for halting any further convergence to the EU, for instance when democratic principles are undermined. Yet these concerns should be determined by the European Commission instead of giving national governments the opportunity to interfere for their national political gains. The prolonging of the accession process has certainly also contributed to the rise of autocratic structures in the region. Therefore, the EU needs to provide a framework that abolishes the possibilities for national blockades and populist governance. The criteria must be respected, as they represent the core values of the Union, but there should be regulatory mechanisms on the EU level that have real consequences. It does not make sense to prevent countries from becoming a member on the basis of non-compliance, but once they have fulfilled the necessary conditions and became members, any reversal of this process goes largely unpunished.

A dire need for shift in strategy

Deepening and widening had gone hand in hand, but then stopped. The very core idea of European integration is to dismantle boundaries, but so far they have only been shifted. As long as there will be countries outside of the club, this segregation will continue. It is high time to combine deepening and widening again. A system without capabilities to adapt is deemed to fail. Consequently, a reform of the institutional set-up is indispensable and an enlargement can then become a fulfilment. European integration had its most promising results in cross-border cooperation as represented by a successful overcoming of many former conflicts, for instance regarding South Tyrol.

Currently, the European Commission and member states still have the most significant influence on the path that the region is taking. Accepting partners into the political Union is the logical consequence of the enlargement strategy. In this framework, the six countries could get accustomed to become regular members of the EU, participating in the decisions on various matters, which will have the advantage of developing their full capacity. For Brussels to remain (or become) globally competitive, it cannot afford a «black hole» in its South-Eastern midst.

PS: Recommendations for an immediate accession of the WB6 to the EU

1. Reforming European decision-making

The need for a reform of the EU institutions has been ignored for far too long. All decisions on the European level need to be taken with a qualified majority instead of unanimity. Brave and bold steps need to be taken. The conference on the Future of Europe is one possibility. However, the pressure from the civil society on the decision makers to really work on restructuring governance in Brussels needs to be increased. This should not only be done on the European level, but also on the national and regional level. Only if there is a demand from the general population, there will be a discussion on European politics during national election campaigns. A European referendum held jointly, and not separately in each member country, could foster discussion beyond national politics and provide a real basis for a reform of European governance. A legal basis for holding such a referendum needs to be passed.

2. Integrating regions into the institutional set-up

In order to ensure a fast political integration of the WB6, the reform of the institutional set-up needs to provide safeguard mechanisms, which will prevent one or a few heads of state or government to interfere with decision-making and/or work against the democratic principles in their country. Next to the EP a new second chamber encompassing representatives from the European regions could replace the Council of Ministers. By granting both the EP and the Council of Regions the right of initiative, not only the role of the structural and cohesion funds would gain more importance but also the influence of national governments on European decision-making would be more balanced. Building a second chamber as a kind of a senate is necessary and would furthermore help to develop the common foreign policy of the EU.

3. Taking advantage of existing cooperation formats

This shift in strategy should be implemented and accompanied by strengthening the already existing instruments, capacities, and regulations. Amongst others the activities of the RCC. CEFTA should be developed into an intensified cooperation modelled after the European Economic Area, which has been proposed already in 2019. This would in a next step also help the WB6 to fully economically become an EU member. The Energy Community successfully represents such an initiative for the energy market. The Transport Community has the potential to become one for mobility. The different cooperation formats regarding reform of the judiciary, police

training and fight against organised crime should further lead to increase their efficiency. With regards to youth, education, and culture, the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) can serve as a platform for integration.

4. **Fostering mutual understanding and exchange**

The institutional reform and immediate accession will need broad support of the EU population. It is necessary to increase the exchange with our neighbours, to foster mutual understanding and to decrease prejudices against each other. Instead of a one-way street there should be a circulation, not only by visiting the region for tourism, but also by working, studying and living there. It has been possible in the 1990s and this should be encouraged and incentivised again. The Austrian government has been a leading actor in this regard and could assume even more responsibility. Last, but not least, the fears of affluent societies in the EU to lose out should be taken into account, but also clearly addressed: European integration is not a zero-sum game and old member states have always gained from enlargement.

5. **Acting now for the future**

A truly accelerated membership will still require some time for preparation and can only be achieved gradually. In a symbolic gesture, a joining ceremony could take place on Europe Day 2022. The reform of the institutional set-up should happen within a clear time frame in order to ensure results, realistically by the end of the Multiannual Financial Framework in 2027. This would leave enough time for the results of the Conference on the Future of Europe to be taken into consideration. Nevertheless, the Convent for a treaty revision should be convened as soon as the process ends.

PPS: Stay in touch with the region (and us!)

Newly published:

Erhard Busek/Sebastian Schäffer: Balkan nach Europa – sofort!
Wien: Story.one Publishing. 80 S. ISBN 978-3-99087-941-2.

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