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The European Union and the Western Balkans

Making the Enlargement a More Credible Process

Event description

On 28 November 2018, in the framework of the current Austrian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, the European Policy Centre – CEP hosted a conference under the name "European Union and the Western Balkans: How to make the enlargement process more credible?". The event was part of the *Western Balkans Reflection Forum Initiative*, launched by a network of European think tanks in support of the Berlin Process.

The conference discussed the best ways to keep the enlargement policy on the agenda of the European Union, both in Brussels and in the member states. The participants also debated the current contribution of the Berlin Process, as well as their prognosis and expectations for the enlargement process in the future. Through two consecutive panels, speakers and participants addressed these questions from the EU's and from the acceding countries' perspectives.

DISCUSSION SUMMARY AND MAIN CONCLUSIONS

A bittersweet 2018

The overall consensus among the participants was that the Western Balkan region naturally belongs in the EU. Regardless, it was pointed out that many obstacles remained before this outcome could become a reality.

Right from the start, the discussants indicated that 2018 was supposed to be a year of great progress in terms of the accession process – yet, it left a 'bittersweet' taste. It was 'sweet', as it was clear that the Western Balkans were on the EU's agenda, to a higher degree than it was the case before. The most notable examples of EU's renewed interest in the region were the European Commission's strategy "A credible enlargement perspective", the Sofia Summit and the enlargement-friendly presidencies of Bulgaria and Austria. Furthermore, the region made progress in terms of reconciliation, such as the Bulgarian-Macedonian *Friendship Agreement*, or the Macedonia-Greece *Prespa Agreement*.

Nevertheless, participants added that the 'bitterness' stemmed from several reasons: 1) the extensive fight against corruption and comprehensive rule of law reforms are still largely lacking in the region; 2) Belgrade-Pristina relations have reached another low – most notably, after the increased customs were introduced; 3) very few chapters opened at the end of 2018 in case of Montenegro and Serbia, with no chapters being closed; 4) Macedonia and Albania were not given the opportunity to initiate the accession negotiations in 2018, despite notable progress these countries had made. All of the aforementioned developments left no room for great satisfaction.

A preoccupied Union in 2019?

Looking ahead to 2019, there are reasonable worries among the participants that the EU is likely to be too distracted by its own internal turbulence to pay sufficient attention to the Balkans. The year 2019 becomes especially important due to the upcoming European Parliament elections, which may prove to be challenging, especially if there is a strong showing for populist or Eurosceptic forces. In addition, the EU will have to deal with the UK's exit and the Multiannual Financial Framework negotiations. Moreover, some discussants warned about high expectations from the upcoming Romanian presidency, as it has kept a rather cautious position vis-à-vis the region, whilst operating under a complicated internal state of affairs. For these reasons, conference participants warn that a dose of realism is necessary when dealing with the future prospects of EU enlargement.

Reforming the Union and enlargement – can they go hand-in-hand?

Furthermore, participants shared an understanding that the European Commission's proposition of the indicative date for joining the Union in 2025 had already fallen flat. Although this announcement sounded promising at first, it soon became clear that some enlargement-sceptic EU member states, most notably France under Macron and the Netherlands under Rutte, were unwilling to get on with EU enlargement as long as the Union was facing internal struggles. In relation to these developments, the conference widely debated whether the EU indeed needed to reform internally prior to any further enlargement.

Many pointed out that the EU had never done one thing at a time, but had rather been prone to multitasking. History confirms this, as the EU has continuously been reforming without ever putting enlargement aside. In fact, the enlargement, as participants highlighted, has been one of the most successful EU's policies. Its transformative power has proven to be the key engine behind social and systemic transformative changes in countries which have expressed the will to join the Union throughout the past. "That alone", as one participant pointed out, "should be the reason why the EU should keep its hands towards the Balkans wide open".



The Berlin Process – successful, but limited reach

On a positive note, the Berlin Process was recognised as a valuable initiative, as it was launched at a time when there was seemingly no enlargement perspective. Not only has it provided a platform to discuss boosting the connectivity between the EU and the Western Balkans, but it has also encouraged the reconciliation talks in the region, as well as the enhancement and further networking of civil society. Nevertheless, the participants pointed out that the Berlin Process could not change the facts on the ground: rule of law area still lacks substantial progress, while corruption remains widespread. These highlights were fairly reminiscent of the ‘state capture’ warning that was given by the European Commission earlier this year.

EU’s conditionality policy – is the bar set too high?

Participants remained divided concerning the EU’s conditionality policy. On the one hand, some argued that the bar need not to be too high. It was pointed out that Western Balkan countries might get discouraged from engaging in comprehensive reforms if the perspective of joining the Union turns out to be solely about making up new conditions. In this regard, it was warned that public opinion matters to a significant extent and that there is a danger in loss of patience by the public. An example of Serbia was given, as its public opinion was the most favourable towards the EU (reaching over 70%), when visa-free regime was granted to the country. From that perspective, it was argued that the ‘carrots’ needed to multiply, as incentives are a necessary part of the enlargement policy.

On the other hand, others argued that the perspective of joining the Union was a ‘big enough carrot’ on its own. Participants arguing for a ‘tough approach’ to the candidates claimed that no significant compromises should be allowed when it came to reform results. This stance is the only way, as they argued, to keep the enlargement as a merit-based process. In other words, this is the only way to make sure that the countries will become fully prepared to join the Union one day. According to this line of thought, the Western Balkan countries were the ones to make a request to join the Union, therefore, it should be up to them to fulfill all the necessary criteria.

Focus on citizens

Despite the fact that the accession process has proven to be very demanding, it was highlighted that more attention ought to be focused on the citizens’ needs. For that reason, participants emphasised, civil society should continue and even step up their efforts into forwarding these needs to the public decision-makers. That way, the region’s

governments should engage in an honest and informative dialogue with their citizens.

Recommendations for Western Balkan policymakers – the road to Sibiu

Furthermore, if the leaders of the region aim to sustain the credibility of the process, participants highlight that they will need to step-up their reform processes significantly. In addition, the six countries will also need to join forces, by jointly tackling common issues, and proactively working on a unified platform, especially in the context of the upcoming Sibiu Summit. As this Summit will allow the EU leaders to reflect on a new Strategic Agenda to guide the work of the EU over the next five years, it would be a good opportunity for the Balkan leaders to make an impact and have the voice of the region heard.

Recommendations for EU leaders – finding the commonality of interests

Yet, the conference recommendations address EU leaders, too. The participants called on the EU leaders to include the Western Balkan countries into the policy-making processes in a greater number of areas, thus echoing the proposal announced by the Commission earlier this year. This proposal highlights an evident commonality of interests and challenges between the region and the EU. The necessity to include the region stems also from the fact that the EU is facing a growing number of issues, of increasing magnitude. The most notable example is the migration crisis, during which the region proved its ability to be a reliable partner. What is more, the region showed itself as constructive, more so than some EU members, in solving this critical issue. Following this example, participants called for a more sincere dialogue and pro-activeness on both sides.

Concluding message

The conference ended with a Jean Monnet quote by one of the participants: “We need to move forward, even at the cost of making concrete plans later.” This quote sums up what needs to be done with the accession negotiation process in the following period: If the goal is to have a unified and strong Europe in the near future, the credibility of the enlargement perspective must be made real and tangible, despite internal or external obstacles that might appear.



The conference was co-organised by the European Policy Centre (CEP, Belgrade), Austro-French Centre for Rapprochement in Europe (CFA/ÖFZ, Vienna), Centre international de formation européenne (CIFE, Nice/Berlin), with the support of and in cooperation with the Open Regional Fund for SEE – Promotion of EU Integration (German Cooperation / GIZ), Institut français des relations internationales (IFRI, Paris), Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI, Rome), German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP, Brussels) and the European Commission (Erasmus+ Programme). The event was part of the “Western Balkans Reflection Forum” initiative, a framework project launched in 2015 by a network of European think tanks in support of the Berlin Process. The initiative promotes discussions with experts in an inclusive and interactive format on strategic and policy-oriented issues relevant to the European Union and the Western Balkans.

About the European Policy Centre - CEP

European Policy Centre - CEP - is a non governmental, non-profit, independent think-tank, based in Belgrade. It was founded by a group of professionals in the areas of EU law, EU affairs, economics and public administration reform, with a shared vision of changing the policy making environment in Serbia for the better – by rendering it more evidence based, more open and inclusive and more substantially EU accession driven.