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## EUROPE COMPLETE

### *European Future Includes the Western Balkans*

The [Conference on the Future of Europe](#) (CotFoE) presents a unique opportunity for citizens to discuss – at a European, national, regional and local level – how to shape the future of the old continent in terms of securing reforms that would lead towards progress, prosperity, and security. As these issues cannot be properly tackled without integrating the Western Balkans (WB) into the wider debates, European Policy Centre (CEP - Belgrade) has taken a proactive step forward by organising a high-level conference under the name EUROPE COMPLETE.<sup>1</sup> The title of this initiative was deliberately chosen to showcase that only a united Europe, a continent comprised of countries sharing common values, can properly address the ever-growing number of cross-border challenges. This concept therefore extends beyond the EU as it envisions the WB as an essential piece of the European puzzle.

Considering that discussions in the framework of the CotFoE are well under way, with a goal of concluding by the summer of the next year, EUROPE COMPLETE was registered at the official Portal of the CotFoE. The key message of the event was that the time is ripe for an open and critical deliberation, not on whether the WB can contribute to the development of the European project, but on how and to what extent. That is why this CEP Presents provides a succinct analysis of key themes that marked the event, such as the idea of introducing a model of accession in stages, involving the region into wider European strategic autonomy, further exploiting the economic benefits from the cooperation between the EU and the Western Balkans, and exploring ways for giving a stronger say to European youth in the context of digital challenges. Hence, the subchapters of this paper follow the titles of panels of the event and present the main ideas, critiques, and conclusions of each panel discussion.

1 As the Europe Complete conference has managed to gather original and valuable input from participants, and thus of the Western Balkans to the European debates, the idea is to make it a standard format to be held on an annual basis. This will allow for the region to have its voice heard even once the CotFoE is over.

### *Towards a Model of a Phased Membership<sup>2</sup>*

The enlargement stalemate has been the elephant in the room in recent years. Even though the revised enlargement methodology was introduced in 2020, it has so far failed to demonstrate a capacity to liberate the Western Balkans from the current [hybrid status quo](#) characterised by the lack of credible and comprehensive rule of law reforms. Meanwhile, as things currently stand, the major political and socioeconomic benefits of the accession process are still likely to arrive only at the point of accession, which still seems as far distant into the future as before the publication of the revised methodology. That is why there appears to be a consensus among civil society experts that the present state of the enlargement process brings [limited benefits](#) both to the region and to the EU, with an increasing dissatisfaction among the local populations in the region as membership seems to be out of reach.

Considering such an unfavourable context, an idea which has been gaining ground is that a model of [accession to the EU in stages](#) is needed to break the impasse. On the one hand, the model envisions reviving incentives for political elites to engage in reforms by introducing gradual access to rights and obligations to the acceding Western Balkan states (in terms of participation in the EU institutions and access to structural funds once fulfilling stringent conditions). On the other hand, the model would ease the key concerns that existing EU member states have over the prospect of further enlargement by avoiding the most serious institutional problems (having a veto power in the Council of the EU, and being a member in the European Commission). For this model to work in practice, a more detailed, coherent, and quantified methodology would be needed, to serve as a basis for credible assessments of Western Balkan states' progress towards deeper integration stages, all the way to the fourth, conventional membership, stage.

2 This panel was moderated by Filip Lukić – Journalist, while the discussants were: Michael Emerson – Associate Senior Research Fellow, Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), Brussels; Milena Lazarević – Programme Director, European Policy Centre (CEP), Belgrade; Milena Muk – Researcher, Institute Alternative (IA), Podgorica; Tanja Mišćević – Deputy Secretary General, Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), Sarajevo.

Although this idea was hailed by many as original and praiseworthy, it has faced some criticism as well. Some of the main critics of this proposal warned that the model requires more legal justification to avoid it not being able to be implemented in practice. Considering that the EU is an entity built upon complex and multiple legal instruments, the details of the model would indeed require further specification to diminish and address in advance the potential scepticism from some EU member states. Another relevant aspect of criticism includes how this model is communicated, both to the political elites and citizens of the WB, in order to address the potential fear that their countries would become permanent second-grade member states of the EU. As the model is quite complex, devising a clever communication strategy would indeed be needed to explain to the citizens and political elites that the regime should even be considered as having an avant-garde quality.<sup>3</sup> Considering these and other warnings, it remains for political leaders in both the EU and the WB to signal their interest in this initiative, and thus launch a debate at the strategic level, so that the institutions can work towards defining a formal proposal.

In geopolitics, the perception of power is everything, which is why the EU has yet to start speaking the language of power. So far, the EU has managed to mainly rely on its soft and economic power for achieving geopolitical goals; this, however, is unlikely to remain a sustainable strategy in the long run.

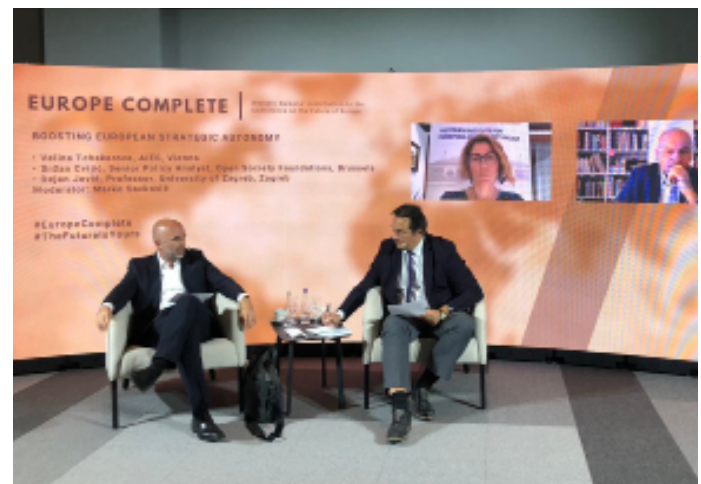
In the case of boosting its military capacities, some go as far to argue that the EU should direct its efforts towards rendering the Union itself into one of the centrepieces of global geopolitics, alongside the US, Russia, and China. The increased focus on the strategic autonomy is, therefore, expected to allow the EU to become a rule-setter, rather than a rule-taker in the future world order. By effectively making plans for a long-term transformation of its foreign and strategic policies, the EU would turn another page when it comes to allowing Europeans to **take care of themselves** vis-à-vis other actors. Although, in practice, this implies an approach which is more independent from the United States, the pursuit of a European strategic autonomy does not per se exclude sustaining transatlantic defence connections, nor does it represent a step towards an arms race.

European strategic autonomy has the word 'European' in it for a good reason – it reflects an overarching opinion that the EU cannot sustain peace, security, sustainability, and development in terms of geopolitics without looking beyond its official borders. This is where the WB step in. Although the region, to a large extent, participates in one way or another, in the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, the EU's ability to rely on the region to address contemporary and hybrid threats are currently quite limited. Given these circumstances, there is a strong need for the EU to project more power and open new ways to include the WB in its policies which are of geostrategic importance. The aforementioned idea of staged membership could fit well here. Raising the level of geostrategic integration of the region with the EU becomes even more important considering that the influence of the external actors, such as China, Russia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates is constantly on the rise – in areas of political, economic, and societal relations.



### Boosting European Strategic Autonomy<sup>4</sup>

Contemporary global developments showcase, time and time again, that various crises cannot always be predicted or adequately tackled without the EU developing its strategic and defence capacities and capabilities. In fact, many have already **warned** that the tragic and sudden turn of events in Afghanistan should serve as a wake-up call for the EU to take concrete steps forward towards developing European strategic autonomy.

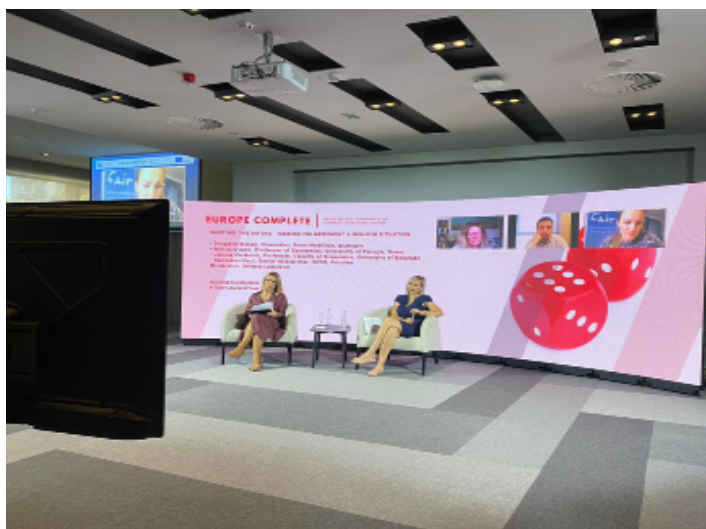


3 The avant-garde quality would consist of the fact that any exclusion from veto voting power would take the acceding states closer to where the EU would like to get to in due course when unanimity requirements would be progressively reduced.

4 This panel was moderated by Marko Savković – Program Director, Belgrade Fund for Political Excellence, while the discussants were: Srđan Cvijić – Senior Policy Analyst, Open Society Foundation, Brussels; Dejan Jović – Professor, University of Zagreb; Velina Tchakarova – Director, Austrian Institute for European and Security Policy (AIES), Vienna.

## Busting the Myths - Making Enlargement a Win-Win Situation<sup>5</sup>

There is a popular narrative among EU member states that the EU's financing of the WB is merely a one-sided and costly exercise which creates no financial benefits for the former while profiting only the latter. In the age of fake news and disinformation, it is particularly important to label this as a simple myth. To that extent, the EU already benefits from the integration of the WB, as the current Stabilisation and Association Agreements have created a very favourable economic environment for its enterprises to operate in the region. This is best reflected in the fact the EU has a large trade surplus with the WB all the while its companies are the ones maximising the enterprise links via privatisation, exploitation of resources, subsidies, and low-cost labour from the region. Furthermore, the EU's influence is notable in the financial sector considering the dominant role of banks from the EU in the WB, and the unilateral adoption of the euro in Montenegro and Kosovo. Keeping all of this in mind, enlargement to the WB will further expand the EU's common market, thus creating room for further maximisation of economic cooperation.



Meanwhile, there is also a widespread misconception in the WB that once the region joins the EU, it will immediately receive all the benefits. Although it is true that the WB are to reap significant economic benefits from future EU membership – particularly via full integration into EU's single market and by receiving significant financial support from the [European Structural and Investment Funds](#) or funds under the [Common Agricultural Policy](#) – there are nevertheless some preconditions that must be met in order to realise the full potential of EU membership. This primarily includes the necessity to strengthen administrative capacities, based on which the applying (future) member states would ensure their absorption rate is high enough.

<sup>5</sup> This panel was moderated by Milena Lazarević - Program Director, European Policy Centre (CEP), Belgrade, while the discussants were: Milica Uvalić – Professor of Economics at the University of Perugia, Italy; Dragana Bubulj – Counselor, Faire Mobilität, Stuttgart; Jelena Žarković – Director, Foundation for the Advancement of Economics (FREN), Belgrade; Ramadan Ilazi – Senior Researcher, Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS), Pristina.

Without domestic reforms in that regard, there is a risk that the WB countries could waste potential funds, while still being obligated to allocate part of the money from their national budget to the EU's overall budget – something every member state is required to do. Therefore, in order to increase the likelihood of the WB states being net-beneficiaries, a long-term strategic view is needed when it comes to implementing sustainable administrative reforms. This showcases that membership in the EU does not automatically guarantee prosperity per se, as there is a lot of work to be done on the WB's side to be ready to fully enjoy all membership benefits.

## European Youth: Addressing Digital Challenges<sup>6</sup>

The number of challenges that youth face in the digital sphere is increasing. Although the internet saved and created plenty of jobs and businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic, a significant rise in internet usage during this health crisis opened many new questions. To that extent, a growing number of young people are struggling to find a balance between real and digital life, all the while they are being increasingly exposed to various types of misinformation and disinformation, and having their privacy jeopardised. Considering that the internet is a place where it is the hardest to implement regulations, there is a general dose of scepticism whether governments can do much to mitigate these negative effects. Nevertheless, the [EU General Data Protection Regulation](#) (GDPR), aimed at protecting data and digital privacy in the EU and the European Economic Area (EEA), is highlighted as an example of good practice – with room for further improvement. Yet, what needs to complement legislative action in this field is the reform of education. In fact, proper education on benefits and challenges of the digital sphere from the early age can properly equip the young with knowledge and skills on how to protect themselves in the digital sphere and recognise fake news, hence increasing their media literacy. This way, rather than undermining democratic values by giving space to undemocratic and uncivilised narratives, the internet may provide a venue for young people to participate in policymaking.<sup>7</sup>

Recognising the key challenges and driven by a youth-led petition to address these issues, civil society organisation from the WB have developed a [Youth Manifesto for Digital Space](#) – an initiative that aims to provide ideas and inspiration to European decision-makers in order to ensure the empowerment of young people online as well as protection of their rights and well-being. As part of the Manifesto, the WB youth, along with their peers across Europe, have come to the conclusion that there is a need to engage in consequential fight against the spread of disinformation and the rise in hate speech; address the detrimental impact of the internet on mental health of youth; and ensure accountability of the social media platforms.

<sup>6</sup> This panel was moderated by Matt Dann, while the discussants were: Paul Butcher – Policy Analyst, European Policy Centre (EPC), Brussels; Tasneem Nasufović – Student, Sarajevo; Lola Paunović – Researcher, European Policy Centre (CEP), Belgrade.

<sup>7</sup> [MladiRini](#) ('Mladi' in local Slavic languages, and 'Rini' in Albanian – meaning youth), a multilingual platform in all the languages of the Western Balkans (alongside English), is a great example of the internet being used as a place where youth can freely express their opinions on a variety of important topics.



The Youth Manifesto's key demands consist, among other things of calls for proper education that improves their media literacy and critical thinking, as well as regulations that protect their personal data in order to create a free and secure digital sphere.<sup>8</sup> Considering that the CotFoE is ongoing, and that the WB and EU youth are being faced with the same challenges in the online sphere, the time is right for such action and similar initiatives to be used as generators of debate and policy-action from relevant stakeholders in Europe.

**Towards Completing Europe**

In conclusion, it should be emphasised that without the WB, Europe cannot be complete. Bearing in mind that WB countries are still not ready for a full membership in the EU, out of the box thinking is essential and required. That is why relevant stakeholders would be recommended to consider developing and implementing the staged membership model, with the aim to re-configure the dynamics of the process of enlargement by incentivising political elites to engage in comprehensive reforms, all the while addressing key concerns of EU member states. What raises the importance of the proposed initiative is the fact that citizens of the region would also be able to see real benefits from European integration, leading to a stronger public support for the entire process.

Meanwhile, progressively integrating the WB could contribute to the European strategic autonomy as well, and thus close the door to potentially malign influence of other external actors. Even if the EU cannot be considered a 'great power' without establishing its own military force, integration of the WB will demonstrate the EU's role as a 'civil power' that acts through economic and political means. Apart from the EU's economic, political, and security interests in enlargement to the WB, the region could also gain additional benefits once achieving membership – under precondition it carries out, not only rule of law reforms, but also administrative, based on which the countries of the region can fully utilise the structural funds. Besides all these political, legislative, and technical matters, the role of youth should not be underestimated, as they represent the future of the European continent. In short, the Conference on the Future of Europe is here, so is the Western Balkan's original contribution to it.



<sup>8</sup>The full list of demands consists of the following: FREE, UNRESTRICTED ACCESS (We want free, unrestricted access to the Internet so that we can learn and share), EDUCATION AND SUPPORT (We want support and education about the internet to become accessible to everyone), PRIVACY AND DATA PROTECTION (We want to be able to protect our data and privacy online), RESPECT ONLINE (We want an online world free from bullying, racism, and intolerance), TERMS AND CONDITIONS (We want terms and conditions that are simple to understand), GOOD QUALITY AND RELIABLE CONTENT (We want access to high-quality and reliable content online, free of disinformation and fake news), FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION (We want to be able to express ourselves freely online), and REGULATION (We want our local governments and the EU to propose and adopt regulations that will protect us and will serve to better our societies).

# About the European Policy Centre - CEP

European Policy Centre - CEP - is a nongovernmental, 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. Profound understanding of EU policies and the accession process, the workings of the Serbian administration, as well as strong social capital combine to create a think-tank capable of not only producing high quality research products but also penetrating the decision making arena to create tangible impact. Today, CEP organises its work into four programme areas:

- 1) Good Governance;
- 2) Internal Market and Competitiveness;
- 3) Regional Policy, Networks and Energy;
- 4) Europe&us.