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## Finland's Presidency of the Council of the EU

### Out of sight, out of mind?

While the Council of the EU has been headed by the countries from the Western Balkan's neighbourhood (Austria, Bulgaria, and Romania) in the last 18 months, the time has come for Finland - a country geographically distant from the region - to take over. The saying "out of sight, out of mind" implies that things can be dismissed as unimportant when not in direct view of the subject. Will this be the case with Finland vis-à-vis the Western Balkans? What can the countries of the region do to get closer to Finland? What are Finland's priorities? This CEP Insight hopes to provide answers to these questions.

### *Sustaining Europe in the Times of Change*

Finland's presidency comes at a transformative moment for the EU. In the aftermath of the European Parliamentary (EP) elections, Eurosceptics have failed to gain a blocking majority and any other key positions in EU institutions, which will prevent them from having a significant impact on policy decisions. Following drawn-out European Council negotiations on filling key EU posts, the EP eventually approved the nomination of Ursula von der Leyen as Jean Claude Juncker's successor as president of the European Commission, avoiding the potential prolongation of an institutional stalemate that seemed likely to take place after the EU28 leaders scrapped the Spitzenkandidaten process.



**As the European Commission (EC) officially begins its new term in November, Finland's presidency will be tasked with ensuring a smooth transition into a new institutional cycle.** In addition, Finland is to be responsible for guiding the finalisation of the Multiannual Financial Framework negotiations as well for contending with Brexit (which might indeed take place by the end of October 2019).

When it comes to Finland's priorities, they include the following: 1) strengthening **common values and the rule of law**; 2) making the EU more **competitive and socially inclusive**; 3) strengthening the EU's position as a global leader in **climate action**; and 4) protecting the **security of citizens** comprehensively. Analysis of the Finnish [presidency programme](#) shows that these priorities match those laid out by the new Commission president as part of her "[Political Guidelines](#) for the new European Commission for 2019-2024." It seems Finland's priorities also largely represent a continuation of those already set by the [Romanian presidency](#) (as both are part of the current "[trio](#)," together with Croatia), albeit with less focus on cohesion and a larger emphasis on rule of law. In fact, Finland's presidency coincides with the release of the EC's [blueprint to strengthen the rule of law](#) within the EU, the most far-reaching and ambitious agenda the EC has initiated to safeguard the principles and mechanisms of rule of law. Finally, **Finland's goals fully align with the spirit and intention of the EU's Strategic Agenda**, and its presidency will be the first to incorporate this five-year agenda into the work of the Council of the EU.

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- 2) *making the EU more competitive and socially inclusive;*
- 3) *strengthening the EU's position as a global leader in climate action;*
- 4) *protecting the security of citizens comprehensively.*

Considering the urgency of these most pressing issues currently faced by the EU, as well as the determined stance of some influential EU member states on prioritising the EU's internal consolidation over enlargement, it comes as no surprise that the Western Balkans's (WB) EU membership perspective has not found a place among Finland's top priorities during its presidency. Nevertheless, the upcoming period promises to be busy for enlargement matters. It may, for instance, represent a chance for the Serbian administration to learn from the Finnish example in the context of the EU accession process.

### **Finland as a Role Model and a Steppingstone for Enlargement**

Even though the Western Balkans and Finland have underdeveloped political and economic relations, the way the latter has organised its presidency could serve as a positive lesson for the former. Typically, preparations for the Council presidency necessitate major efforts by the wider national administrative apparatus, as the presiding member state takes on a much-increased workload. Not only does this transition require proper and long-term planning, financial expenditures, and the division of responsibility: it is also dependent on administrative continuity. When it comes to Finland, its preparations for the Council presidency were accompanied by a period of political unease; nevertheless, **Finland has managed to overcome challenges and to prove how a stable and well-developed system of governance can sustain internal pressures.**

Namely, Finland's preparation for the presidency occurred concurrently with the most recent general elections that took place in April 2019, after the [collapse](#) of the previous government. With none of the parties gaining more than 20% of the vote due to increased political [fragmentation](#), it was only in June that the new Finnish government was [formed](#) – just a month before the official takeover of the presidency. Despite the complex developments of these past months, Finland's capability to prepare for the Council presidency remained unimpeded. It appears, in fact, that **Finland transitioned into the presidency in a smooth manner, primarily thanks to its well-developed administrative continuity, which was proven to be independent, immune from political disruptions.**

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According to the [Finnish ambassador](#) to Serbia, in Finland “political appointees are an exception, career civil servants are a rule.” This message should be taken seriously by the countries of the Western Balkans, which have yet to depoliticise and professionalise their own public administration systems. As good governance represents one of the key aspects of the EU accession process, though a horizontal issue not specifically governed by a single chapter, **the countries of the Western Balkans will, following Finland's example, need to work further to guarantee the independence, impartiality, and fairness of their public systems.**

Furthermore, Finland can serve as an example of a country which works well to develop and safeguard essential elements of democracy, such as the rule of law, freedom of the media, and the defence of fundamental rights. According to the 2019 [Freedom House Report](#), Finland is the highest-scoring country in the world (alongside Sweden and Norway), in its “freedom rating,” “political rights,” and “civil liberties” rankings. Similarly, Finland has demonstrated some of the best results worldwide in the field of rule of law, according to the 2019 [WJP Rule of Law Index](#). Finns also seem to recognise the performance of their government: according to the 2019 [EU Justice Scoreboard](#), Finns are only behind the citizens of Denmark as EU member state citizens that most positively rate the state of the judiciary in their home country. For these reasons it is **unsurprising that Finland has put “strengthening common values and the rule of law” as its top priority.**

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Needless to say, the countries of the Western Balkans are far behind Finland in many areas, and especially when it comes to the state of rule of law. The European Commission recognised that the Western Balkans shows clear “elements of [state capture](#),” and as Chapters 23 (*Judiciary and fundamental rights*) and 24 (*Justice, freedom and security*) represent essential elements of the accession process, substantial and long-term reforms lie ahead for the region. For this reason, WB should look to countries such as Finland as potential role models. In fact, **the WB region should not shy away from utilising the Finnish presidency to its advantage, primarily by increasing communication with Finland and by acquiring its know-how.**

All upcoming efforts aimed at improving rule of law and good governance in the Western Balkans are of major importance, particularly bearing in mind that the presidencies of Croatia (first half of 2020), and Slovenia (second half of 2021) are approaching. As it is expected that enlargement will represent an important focus of their terms, progress made by the region in the coming months will most certainly be closely followed. Hence, **Finland’s presidency should be used as a steppingstone, in order to show a credible track record to be used as an argument for the reinvigoration of enlargement policy during the forthcoming period.**

### Enlargement Scepticism as Potential Concern

**T**raditionally, Finland has been an enlargement-friendly country and has [reaffirmed](#) its commitment to enlargement earlier and upon taking over the Council presidency. Yet, following a larger trend across the EU, a large percentage of Finns remain sceptical of this EU policy. In fact, according to the latest [Eurobarometer](#) (November 2018), **Finnish citizens are the least supportive nation of enlargement among the EU28** (see *Table 1* for averages). Such a

striking fact illustrates that regional leaders will need to work more to convince Finns, along with other citizens of the EU, that the accession of the Western Balkans can contribute to the overall good of the EU.

**Table 1:** Finns’ stance on the enlargement

	Finnish	EU average
support	28%	43%
oppose	64%	45%
do not know	8%	12%

*Author’s representation of Eurobarometer findings*

Furthermore, it appears that part of the negative perception of enlargement in Finland is that this idea is often tied to the prospect of Turkey’s potential membership. According to a [YouGov](#) Survey (December 2018), there is far less support for Turkey’s accession to the EU than for that of the Western Balkan countries (see *Table 2*). **At the moment, it is unclear how the region can decouple itself from Turkey, as the latter is still a candidate country.**

**Table 2:** Finns’ stance on enlargement vis-à-vis individual Western Balkan countries and Turkey

	For	Against	Don’t know
Montenegro	35%	31%	34%
BIH	33%	32%	36%
North Macedonia	31%	32%	37%
Serbia	26%	40%	34%
Kosovo*	25%	41%	34%
Albania	22%	45%	34%
Turkey	9%	70%	21%

*Author’s representation of YouGov findings*



Looking at the individual scores of the WB countries, they can be coupled into two groups: on the one hand, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia face an almost equal split between those citizens that support, those that are against, and those who do not yet have an opinion on their accession (1/3 split between each). On the other hand, there is less support for Serbia, Kosovo\* and Albania, yet the share of the population still undecided remains high. Therefore, **despite an overall unfavourable position, there is still room to positively impact Finnish public opinion about the Western Balkans in coming years.**

In spite of the discouraging results of these surveys, the Finnish political leadership has continued to support EU enlargement policy. In fact, Finland traditionally perceives EU enlargement as an opportunity to extend the benefits of the single market, peace, and security further across Europe.

According to Finnish stakeholders,<sup>1</sup> **the scarcity of information about the Western Balkans in the Finnish media might be one of the reasons for a rather negative public perception of future EU enlargements.**

While there is currently no concern that the political leadership of Finland will take a more sceptical stance on enlargement in the foreseeable future, this does not mean that the Western Balkans should sit on the side-lines. In fact, political elites of the Western Balkans and civil society from the region should devise action plans for engagement in open and frank discussions with their EU counterparts on the European perspective for this region. **The more support from citizens for enlargement across the EU, the easier it will be for the Balkans and the European Commission to push the process through the currently-reluctant EU member states.**



1. In May 2019, in the framework of the “Europeanisation Beyond Process” project (funded by the Open Society Initiative for Europe), CEP had the chance to meet Finnish stakeholders in Helsinki from government institutions, civil society, and academia. The aim was to discuss the Finnish position on membership perspectives of Western Balkans states in the context of the Finnish Council Presidency, and to place the Western Balkans in the “Future of Europe” debates. In the framework of the *Think for Europe Network* (TEN), CEP and its regional partners will hold a public discussion in Helsinki in September 2019, in partnership with the Finnish Institute for International Affairs, on current issues and challenges in EU-WB relations. With this event, TEN and CEP wish to instigate dialogue and increased interaction between the WB region and the Finnish public, to ensure greater mutual understanding and to incite the formulation of ideas that could produce results in the WB’s EU accession process.

## About the European Policy Centre

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, with a strong focus on horizontal policymaking and coordination;
- 2) Internal Market and Competitiveness;
- 3) Regional Policy, Networks and Energy;
- 4) Europe&us.


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