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UNPACKING THE 2021 ENLARGEMENT PACKAGE

After the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, there were moderate expectations in 2021 in terms of the Western Balkans' recovery and progression into the EU. Recognising that the pandemic created new challenges in the region all the while exacerbating the existing ones, European Policy Centre (CEP) organised an [online discussion](#) in order to unpack the 2021 [Enlargement Package](#). The event was organised alongside the Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) of the European Commission, and the Think for Europe Network (TEN) which gathers think tank representatives from all Western Balkan countries. In the first part, the acting Director-General, Maciej Popowski, presented the Package and emphasised the key results, while in the second, TEN members presented their views, comments, recommendations, and questions from the standpoint of their country.¹ The aim of these discussions was to present to the public the key findings of the Commission's annual reports, all the while highlighting to what extent these converge with the regional think tanks' assessment of the situation on the ground.

The Enlargement Package from the Perspective of the European Commission...

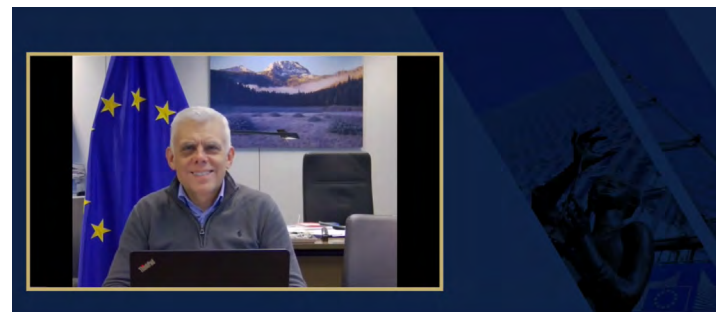
The Enlargement Package – which is typically called “the mother of all packages”² – came out at a critical juncture in October 2021, that is, right after the tour of the Commission's president across the Western Balkans and the EU-Western Balkan Summit in Slovenia. Building upon these developments, the Commission's aim was to present a “very balanced and objective” assessment of the situation on the ground. Yet, despite these developments the Commission appears to be aware that the package “did not make anybody entirely happy”, particularly as some think tanks have warned that the tone was “softer” compared to the previous years. Yet, the argument made, at least from Commission's standpoint, is that the package is a result of continuous teamwork between DG NEAR and other DGs, as well as international organisations and embassies of member states, which highlights that “there is no shortage of data” that could speak against the credibility of the package.

1 TEN speakers: Srđan Majstorović, Chairman of Governing Board, European Policy Centre (CEP), Belgrade, Haris Čutahija, Researcher, Foreign Policy Initiative (FPI BH), Sarajevo, Marko Sošić, Policy Analyst, Institute Alternative (IA), Podgorica, Arbëresha Loxha Stublla, Executive Director and Senior Research Fellow, Group for Legal and Political Studies (GLPS), Pristina, Gjergji Vurmo, Programme Director, Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM), Tirana, and Ardita Abazi Imeri, Programme Coordinator, European Policy Institute (EPI), Skopje. The panel was moderated by Milena Lazarević, CEP's Programme Director.

2 All cited statements are quoted from the participants.

Meanwhile, this was the first reporting year that was entirely based on the revised enlargement methodology, adopted by the Commission in 2020. Besides the introduction of clustering of chapters, its goal was to enable more credibility, more predictability, more dynamism, and stronger political steer. That is why the Commission continues to argue that a strong element of conditionality is present, while the process remains merit based. Yet, what stands out in that regard is that despite the package is based on the revised enlargement methodology “the conclusions are not fundamentally different from last year.” To that extent, it is recognised that the methodology has yet to maximise its potential, as the EU member states have yet to overcome their differences – most notably in the case of North Macedonia and Albania who are kept in the standstill despite Commission's conclusions that these have fulfilled all the necessary conditions for the opening of the accession talks.

Considering the existing hurdles, the Commission emphasises that taking steps forward is of outstanding importance for maintaining the accession process alive. Only this way can the EU prevent losing the interest of local population and thus losing the Western Balkan countries as credible partners and future members of the EU. To find consensus between member states and diminish divergence with the Commission's position and recommendation for each Western Balkan country, and thus avoid any deadlock and prolongation of the process, the Commission has been in regular touch with the ongoing Slovenian Presidency and other member states. In that regard, even stronger dedication of the regional countries to fulfilling benchmarks for opening and closing new chapters within clusters would make the enlargement policy more appealing in the eyes of EU member states and thus the Commission's job more effective.



EU ENLARGEMENT TO THE WESTERN BALKANS IN THE LIGHT OF THE NEW METHODOLOGY

DISCUSSION ABOUT 2021 ENLARGEMENT PACKAGE

24.11. 2021
15.30 - 17.00



... and the Western Balkans' think tanks

Although the Commission insists that the latest Package is fully in line with the assessment requirements and thus produces a realistic perspective of the situation on the ground, the Western Balkans' think tanks have a somewhat distinct perspective. Namely, the key point of criticism is the fact that the country reports focus on the formal steps taken by the region's governments, often described as "ticking the box" exercise. In practice, such exercise hides the lack of substantial progress and distorts the perception of the real situation on the ground, all the while undermining the credibility of the overall EU accession process under the existing rules. In other words, the key message is that there is a dire need to overcome the box-ticking exercise, primarily by "calling a spade a spade" – that is, by calling out the "state capture" more explicitly. Therefore, think tankers warn that without having clearer messages by the Commission in its reports, the principles enshrined in the revised methodology are unlikely to bear fruits.

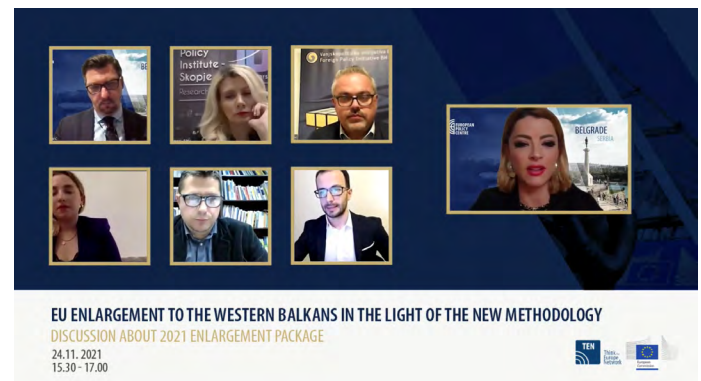
Meanwhile, there is a consensus that the enlargement package has been overshadowed by the blockage of the North Macedonia's and Albania's accession path. This inability to reach consensus not only points to internal dysfunctionality of the EU's approach to the region, but also damages the EU's credibility in general. This, in fact, indicates that there is a need of stronger and more genuine involvement of EU member states, in cooperation and coordination with the Commission, to unblock the process and prevent such blockages from taking place in the future. Only with greater overlap of perspectives between the Commission and EU member states vis-à-vis the Western Balkan countries can the annual country reports function as credible references based on which reforms can be pushed for in an effective manner.

Without adapting the manner in which the situation on the ground is assessed, monitored, and spelled out in the reports, think tanks warn that the uncertainty will remain a constant when it comes to Western Balkans' future in the EU. This becomes all the more important considering that some countries of the region are even worse off now in terms of the overall democratic standards than when they stated their path towards the EU. Instead of the current support for "50 shades of political stability" in the Western Balkans, a clear "No" is necessary for leaders

who promote corruption and state-capture which are anti-European in their essence. The Commission's "finding the middle-ground" approach needs to be modified for this to work.

Getting ready for the 2022 Enlargement Package

The process of unpacking the 2021 Enlargement Package highlights that there are surely lessons to be learnt, particularly in the context of preparing the next year's package. Although the Commission and the regional think tankers may have diverging opinions on how genuine the assessment of the annual reports is, what they do agree on is that the current developments regarding the accession process are not as dynamic as they could be, particularly as the process has yet to become politically steered in a more unified manner. In anticipation of greater synergy between the EU institutions' positions on the pace of the individual Western Balkan countries on their path to the EU, the EU should well lend itself to think tanks' out-of-the-box ideas for breaking the existing enlargement impasse.³



³ An example of an innovative proposal is the "Model of Staged Accession", which aims to revive and sustain the incentives for Western Balkan states to continue their European integration journey, while easing the most serious concerns that existing EU Member States have over the prospect of further enlargement. See: Michael Emerson, Milena Lazarević, Steven Blockmans and Strahinja Subotić, "A Template for Staged Accession to the EU", European Policy Centre (CEP - Belgrade) and Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS - Brussels), 2021, available at: <https://cep.org.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/A-Template-for-Staged-Accession-to-the-EU.pdf>

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.