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EU enlargement to the Western Balkans in the light of the war in Ukraine

The outbreak of the war in Ukraine has dramatically changed the geopolitical map of Europe. With aggression against the sovereign and independent European state, Russia has drawn a line and isolated itself from peaceful and free Europe. Former Soviet republics such as Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia rushed into the embrace of the European Union (EU), unwilling to remain behind Russia's newly erected iron curtain. In the meantime, Western Balkan (WB) countries are continuing the European integration process, which is most clearly reflected in opening accession talks with Albania and (conditionally) North Macedonia, as well as in granting candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). Simultaneously, changed geopolitical circumstances brought their alignment with the EU Foreign and Security Policy to the top of the agenda. In such a context, tracking where the WB countries stand on their path to the EU gains further importance.

In order to grasp where do the WB6 stand in 2022 in terms of their reform pace and overall preparedness for membership, while acknowledging the importance of the WB partners for Europe to be completed and united in the time of ongoing geopolitical and economic crisis, CEP hosted the event "Unpacking the Enlargement Package 2022: EU Enlargement to the Western Balkans in the light of the war in Ukraine" on 7 November 2022, together with its regional partners gathered in the Think

for Europe Network (TEN) and in cooperation with the Directorate-General for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR).¹ Acting Director-General, Maciej Popowski, presented the Package and highlighted the key results, following TEN members presenting their views, comments and recommendations from the perspective of their country. The aim of this discussion was to present to the public the key findings of the Commission's annual reports, clarify and make them more transparent. By communicating the Commission's findings to citizens and decision-makers, the goal is to truly prioritise the implementation of reforms that are required for EU membership.

¹ TEN speakers: Srđan Majstorović, Chairman of Governing Board, European Policy Centre (CEP), Belgrade; Haris Čutahija, Researcher, Foreign Policy Initiative (FPI BH), Sarajevo; Marko Sočić, Policy Analyst, Institute Alternative (IA), Podgorica; Arber Fetahu, Research Fellow, Group for Legal and Political Studies (GLPS), Pristina; Ardita Abazi Imeri, Programme Coordinator, European Policy Institute (EPI), Skopje; Alban Dafa, Researcher, Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM), Tirana. The panel was moderated by Corina Stratulat from European Policy Centre (EPC), Brussels.



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

Russia's aggression on Ukraine fundamentally changed the security environment in Europe and has had an impact on many aspects of people's daily lives, but it also had a strong influence on enlargement policy. This is best illustrated in the historical decision of granting candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova and the accession perspective to Georgia. Consequently, this Enlargement Package will extend the scope of countries it encompasses, bearing in mind that it will include three more countries from the next year. Besides from Eastern European partners, the EU has also recognised the momentum to act in terms of enlargement to the WB. It did so by unanimously expressing will for opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania in July 2022 for the sake of the Union's strategic interests. Furthermore, the Commission's recommendation that BiH be granted candidate status and the expected approval of the proposal by member states, is to become a step forward and proof of the seriousness of the EU's intentions towards the region.

Although geopolitical challenges instigated the Commission to act more quickly and decisively, the focus on fundamentals was mostly maintained. The Commission made it clear that the rule of law and political criteria, such as the functioning of democratic institutions, media freedom and the status of civil society, will remain the central pillars of the EU integration process. It emphasised that, in addition to compliance with EU legislation, WB countries are expected to demonstrate concrete results in key areas such as the fight against corruption, well-functioning judiciary etc. On the other hand, the new strategic context has increased the importance of Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) alignment, which is no longer merely a statistical value but rather a question of strategic belonging to the bloc of states that oppose Russian aggression. Altogether, the impression is that the war in Ukraine created a new "blocking chapter" and made it as essential as the rule of law and the functioning of the democratic process.

Although the mentioned leaps forward made in 2022 are valuable, they are just stepping-stones towards tangible achievements that are yet to come. By highlighting that the enlargement momentum is there, the Commission confirmed its will to move ahead with this process decisively. In that regard, the next



EU-WB Summit will take place in Tirana on 6 December 2022. Having in mind that this would be the first time that such a summit is held in the region and in a country that is not a full member of the EU, this sends an important political signal and reaffirms the credibility of accession prospects. In addition, Ursula von der Leyen's, the Commission's President, [visits](#) to the WB and announcement of a big [energy package](#) – EUR 1 billion support for the region to cope with the energy crisis – illustrates that the EU perceives the WB as its integral part. This showcases that the EU is aware of the need to send clear commitments that it will stand by the region's side in the time of crisis.

Still, bearing in mind that one of the principles of the new methodology is reversibility, meaning that nothing should be taken for granted, it sends a reminder that if the achieved progress does not prove to be long-lasting, the acquired benefits may be revoked. Although the Commission considers that the [revised methodology](#) works well, it admits that many aspects of methodology need to be developed and tested in practice. This is particularly the case when it comes to the operationalisation of the concept of "early integration". Regarding that, the Commission is a part of the dialogue with the think-tank community whose out-of-the-box ideas, such as the [Staged accession model](#), try to advance the [gradual integration](#) further and put the new methodology principles fully into practice. As the region has yet to fully commit to implementation of reforms, while the geopolitical situation is becoming more complex, there is a clear need to continue with deepening the constructive relationship between the Commission and think tanks in order to find joint solutions on how to further integrate the region and the EU during the accession process.

...and the Western Balkans' think tanks

If only one emotion could describe how Western Balkans' think tanks feel about the state of affairs in their countries' progress towards the EU, it would be – disappointment. One of the impressions was that BiH could be perceived as a winner of the last Enlargement Package, taking into account the Commission's recommendation to grant it candidate status. Still, back in June 2022, the European Council expressed its readiness to grant the candidate status to Bosnia only if 14 key priorities were implemented, but BiH has yet to meet them which could cause a delay in achieving a candidate status. Although negotiation talks with Albania and (conditionally) North Macedonia finally started, a



frustratingly long process increased Euroscepticism in these two countries. Disappointment is also present in Montenegro, due to unrealistic [expectations](#) that this country would become a member state by 2024 which now becomes clear that it is not going to happen. Finally, Serbia has not opened any new cluster since last year, while Kosovo* is still struggling to obtain visa free travel. Altogether, a slow European integration process associated with its insufficient ability to transform the WB's societies into consolidated liberal democracies produced disappointment, but also fear of penetration of external actors' malign influences that could undermine fragile democratic achievements in the region.

This year's reports once again highlighted chronic problems in WB countries. Starting from the necessary institutional reforms, the fight against corruption and organised crime, the credibility of the judiciary and media freedom, up to the Belgrade-Pristina normalisation process, the 2022 Enlargement Package repeats the already known priorities. Speaking of individual countries, political stability, and broader consensus among stakeholders on key reforms in Montenegro, particularly meeting the interim rule of law benchmarks, will move this front-runner acceding country closer to the EU membership. Albania stands out because it has to address property rights and minority issues, while Serbian authorities are invited to improve proactive and objective communication on the EU.² Polarised political atmo-

² The fact that the Commission had to make this kind of recommendation for one country that wants to be a frontrunner in the accession process was assessed as very strange thing, witnessing that increasingly negative public perception of the EU in Serbia is mostly caused by the non-objective public communication on EU affairs.

sphere and difficulties in achieving decision-making quorum burden democratic processes in Kosovo*, while the work of the Macedonian Parliament was also hampered by political polarisation, which delayed the adoption of many pieces of legislation. In addition, all political actors in BiH need to stay committed to principles for ensuring a functional state capable of taking on the obligations of EU membership. However, besides local-specific issues, intensifying efforts to strengthen democracy and the rule of law, as well as tackling elements of state capture, remain common priorities that all governments in the region must commit to.

Considering the noted long-standing issues the WB6 are facing, there seems to be consensus that the lack of transformative effects of the EU enlargement policy is becoming evident. This is particularly the case in Serbia whose level of preparedness for EU membership has practically [stagnated](#) since 2016. It also stands out negatively by refusing to align with the EU declarations and restrictive measures against Russian Federation which led to *backsliding* in chapter 31, for the first time since the accession process started. Regarding Montenegro, this year's report shows that the country does not make progress in any significant area and that almost none of the recommendations from last year were implemented. In the case of Albania and North Macedonia, despite the progress that has been noted in many aspects over the years, the overall level of preparation is practically unchanged. Given that by the time the Commission's report was out, BiH had yet to achieve candidate status, while Kosovo is still a long way from it, the WB6 appears to be at a stalemate.



All of this demonstrates that the currently known process is not delivering enough, confirming the necessity for out-of-the-box thinking, which could lead to innovative solutions.

Recognise momentum for regaining transformative power of the enlargement

The process of unpacking the 2022 Enlargement Package showed that the views of the European Commission and the think tank community from the region coincide to a large extent. There is broad consensus that the enlargement momentum exists, and it is up to both the EU and the WB6 to grab this opportunity. On the other hand, it is hard to deny difficulties in implementation of key reforms in the WB, as well as fears of accepting unconsolidated democracies as future member states. In that regard, organisations from the region are advocating new ideas through which the enlargement impasse could be overcome and external actors prevented from getting a foothold in the region.

In line with that, CEP created, in cooperation with the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS – Brussels), the [Staged accession model](#) which addresses the problem regarding insufficient political will for reforms in the WB by creating tangible incentives in terms of increased funding and participation in EU institutions in the pre-accession stages. Additionally, the Model also addresses fears that membership of unconsolidated democracies would jeopardize the functioning of the EU27 by temporarily limiting the exercise of the veto power in the Council once the WB6 become new member states. Having in mind that 2023 will mark 20 years since the Thessaloniki summit when the Western Balkan countries were promised a European perspective, it would be of great importance for the EU to use this geopolitical moment to speed up the accession process, increase its leverage and suppress the corrosive impact of third actors, and show the increasingly Eurosceptic citizens of the region that it has not forgotten about them.



About 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) Our Europe.