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Unpacking the 2023 Enlargement Package

A Wake-up Call for the Western Balkans

In the wake of Russian aggression against Ukraine, the intricate game of geopolitical considerations has prompted the EU to recalibrate its approach to enlargement. This recalibration has not gone unnoticed in the Western Balkans and former Eastern Partnership countries, where anticipation hangs in the air. Expectations are large, yet the undeniable truth lingers: the EU must reform its institutional groundwork for enlargement to materialise. Against this backdrop, Charles Michel, the President of the European Council, has cast a hopeful gaze towards 2030 as a [target date](#) when the EU should complete its internal reforms to become enlargement-ready. Simultaneously, candidate and potential candidate countries are urged to amplify their reform efforts. Brussels remains resolute – any progression towards membership will be merit-based, with an unwavering commitment to the rule of law. As the anticipation builds, all eyes turn to the 2023 Enlargement Package so as to see what the Commission has to say about the progress of respective countries, while also accounting for the Commission's new [Growth Plan for the Western Balkans](#).

In that context, CEP organised a [webinar](#) titled 'Discussing the 2023 Enlargement Package and the Functioning of Democratic Institutions in the Western Balkans', inviting its regional partners from the Think for Europe Network (TEN) to participate. The event featured the participation of the Ambassador of Italy to Serbia, H.E. Luca Gori, as well as Mr Ger Jan Koopman, the Director-General for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations. The event had two primary objectives. Firstly, it served as a platform to delve into the EU's 2023 Enlargement Package and the current state of the accession process in the Western Balkans. Esteemed experts from each WB country shared their insights and perspectives, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the region's path forward. Secondly, the webinar presented the results of CEP's research, which scrutinised the Commission's methodology for evaluating the Functioning of Democratic Institutions (FoDI) across the region. This research and webinar were made possible with the [support](#) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Italy.



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

This year's reports create a familiar narrative reminiscent of previous years, indicating that states in the Western Balkans are not making sufficient progress. Notably, no country in the region has achieved a good level of preparation for membership in the critical chapters 23 and 24 that focus on the rule of law. The normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Pristina is at an even lower level, marked by tensions culminating in the September terrorist attack in Banjska. Both Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina still exhibit a low level of compliance with the CFSP, while North Macedonia still faces the imperative of adopting constitutional amendments. When it comes to Albania, the Commission has reminded this country that it should work much more energetically in the fight against corruption and organised crime. Montenegro has remained at a standstill as it was unable to manage to form the Government during the reporting period. In contrast, the outstanding accomplishments of Ukraine and Moldova, fuelled by a commendable level of optimism, energy, and dedication, were praised in the reports. Rather than perceiving this accomplishment gap as a setback, the Commission insist on perceiving it as a pivotal moment that could be used to demand more resolute action from leaders in the Western Balkans.

In fact, there is a consensus that now is the time for the Western Balkans to take decisive action and seize the currently opened window of opportunity. However, the Commission is conscious of the imperative to intensify its own efforts, advocating for a swifter integration of the candidate countries. This strategic approach serves a dual purpose: anchoring them to the EU for geopolitical reasons and establishing the foundation for mutual benefits derived from the enlargement process. Recognising the collaborative essence of this endeavour, the Commission expresses the sentiment that 'It takes two to tango,' and emphatically highlights that the Commission 'is ready to dance.' The Commission's readiness and eagerness to actively engage and expedite the enlargement process are accompanied by the expectation of an equal commitment from the candidate countries. As evidence of the Commission's increased commitment, the webinar offered a platform for further explanation of the "Growth Plan for the Western Balkans", a fresh idea recently proposed by Ursula von der Leyen during her tour of the region.

Recognising the increasing need to bridge the socioeconomic gap between the region and the EU, while creating conditions to accelerate enlargement, the Growth Plan introduces two key incentives: 1) to grant WB countries access to seven key areas of the internal market, with the aim of doubling the size of their economies within a decade, and 2) to provide a robust financial incentive totalling 6 billion euros, comprising two billion in grants and an additional four billion in the form of

loans. What distinguishes this tool is that its benefits will be upon reach only under condition if progress is made towards completing the common regional market, and avoiding impediments from any country that could potentially block fellow candidate countries. Furthermore, it was clarified that the design of the Growth Plan follows the same logic as the Next Generation EU, where payments are *ex-ante* conditional on fulfilling the necessary reforms within a specific timeframe. In a sense, the Growth Plan represents "a form of staged accession", as the proposed integration of the candidates is both gradual, merit-based, and reversible. Notably, although yet to be officially approved by the European Parliament and the Council, the Growth Plan has already gained sympathies among member states, signifying that the Commission is on the right track to secure a collective acknowledgement of the necessity for an augmented financial framework to push forward the growth of the Western Balkans.

... and the Western Balkans' Think Tanks...

Although the think tankers reaffirmed the Commission's assessment that the overall level of preparedness for membership of the WB countries has basically remained the same, they have warned that these findings will be a subject of misinterpretation by the governments in the region. For instance, in the case of Albania, concerns were raised that the focus on Albania's (formidable) activities in the international arena, such as its **chairmanship** of the UN Security Council or **opening** of the College of Europe campus, will continue to overshadow domestic shortcomings in reforms. Similarly, Serbian officials have already **assessed** Serbia's progress report as positive merely because 'there was no backsliding' in any of the chapters (unlike last year's report, where chapter 31 on foreign policy registered backsliding for the first time). While this minimalistic approach to reading the reports may be favourable for the governments when approaching their constituencies, it is certainly not aligned with the required enthusiasm needed to meet the (potential) 2030 target year for enlargement.

Going beyond communication, while focusing on the level of preparedness for membership, the picture remains bleak, particularly as countries of the region seem to be facing characteristics of "a limbo state". This is a novel concept that refers to a state whose leadership's inability, or perhaps, unwillingness to break free from the status quo becomes its defining characteristic.

Going beyond communication, while focusing on the level of preparedness for membership, the picture remains bleak, particularly as countries of the region seem to be facing characteristics of “a limbo state”. This is a novel concept that refers to a state whose leadership’s inability, or perhaps, unwillingness to break free from the status quo becomes its defining characteristic. In line with such description, Montenegro and Serbia *ceased* to be seen as the front-runners of EU integration (both the Commission and think tanks agreeing on this change of perception). Bosnia and Herzegovina also continue to struggle with internal dynamics and inability to implement the 14 priorities. Albania and Kosovo, although achieving more progress this year than other WB counterparts, are still struggling to demonstrate genuine leaps forward. It remains uncertain whether and when North Macedonia will secure the necessary majority for constitutional amendments. Nevertheless, the environment of this kind is supposed to be interpreted as a call for action, requiring more meaningful engagement of the EU in incentivising the reforms – with the Growth Plan and further consideration of the [Model for Staged Accession to the EU](#) as potential solutions for overcoming the status quo.

...Followed by Valuable Recommendations: How to Improve Reporting on FoDI?

Recognising that the *Functioning of Democratic Institutions* (FoDI) is the only subarea in the report lacking any assessment of preparation and progress, CEP has highlighted the urgent necessity to overcome this issue. Following a comprehensive analysis of the 2022 Enlargement Package¹, notable [inconsistencies](#) in the Commission’s reporting on these topics were identified,

¹ The original aim was to influence the 2023 Enlargement Package. Although the project was successful in the sense that the Commission confirmed that they received the papers before the publication of the Package, many issues have remained, particularly the lack of preparedness and progress assessment for the FoDI.

with varying degrees of inconsistency in subareas such as “Elections”, “Parliament”, “Governance”, “Civil Society” and “Civilian Oversight of Security Forces”. For instance, in the cases of Montenegro, Albania, and Kosovo, the Commission did not provide any data or comments on civilian oversight of security forces. Upon mapping such omissions in each country’s 2022 report, the research delved deeper, devising [a method to quantify the FoDI](#).

Through cross-referencing specific policy elements with third-party indexes and rescaling them to a 1-5 scale, aligned with the Commission’s assessing style, CEP proposed a viable option for measuring levels of preparedness in this crucial area of the Fundamentals.² Finally, CEP provided a roadmap on how to [deepen and expand the scope](#) of Commission’s assessments in the FoDI in future reports, with the aim to make them more credible reflections on the state of affairs on the ground. Realising the importance of ensuring the functionality of democratic institutions, it was emphasised for the Commission to engage in further conversation with think tanks of the region on this matter.

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² According to the results, which encompass five key pillars of FoDI, North Macedonia received the highest ranking (3.54), followed by Montenegro (3.50), Albania (3.45), Kosovo (3.39), Serbia (3.18), and Bosnia and Herzegovina (2.98).

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

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