



Report

The Western Balkans towards EU integration: what are the prospects and main challenges?

VOCAL
EUROPE

 Rue de la Science 14, 1040 Brussels

 office@vocaleurope.eu

 + 32 02 588 00 14

The Report

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I. General Overview

At the Sofia summit in May 2018, the European Union reaffirmed its support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans and introduced the so-called Sofia Agenda, with the purpose of enhancing cooperation within the region and to give a forceful impetus to the region's political, economic and social transformation.

This underlined the next steps towards European integration, and the European Commission recommended the opening of negotiations with Albania and former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia in April this year. This recommendation followed the adoption of a Strategy for the Western Balkans by the European Commission in February 2018. The Strategy identified 2025 as a possible perspective for the accession of Serbia and Montenegro to the Union and set out an action plan aimed inter alia at strengthening the rule of law, increasing the socio-economic development and supporting reconciliation and good neighbourly relations between the countries of the region. On 26 June 2018 the Council set out a path for Albania and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia's towards opening accession negotiations in June 2019. The decision was endorsed by the European Council in the same month.

Since the Thessaloniki summit in 2003, the EU has provided continuous support (political, financial and technical) to the Western Balkans to take forward political and economic reforms to help partners in the region align with EU standards and thus to move forward on the common goal of European integration.

The Western Balkans countries have provided significant contributions to the European Union's fight against terrorism and violent extremism, as well as in global security, contributing staff to EU peace missions around the world. Furthermore, the economic ties between the EU and the Western Balkans have continuously developed: in 2016, the region's total trade with the Union was over €43 billion, with an increase of 80% since 2008, and show significant further growth potential.

Despite the challenges faced by the Western Balkans, such as migration, the need structural economic reform, the fight against corruption and environmental issues, they are considered by the Union as reliable partners moving towards European integration and as a geostrategic investment, which will serve the political, security and economic interests the region shares with the Union.

This report follows the event "The Western Balkans towards EU integration: what are the prospects and main challenges?" held by Vocal Europe on 19 June 2018 with the support of Science14.

Co-authors of this report are:

Alessio Tardivo

Julien Hoes

Madalina Sisu Vicari

Valeria Mingardi

II. Introduction

“The Western Balkans are at the heart of Europe; we belong to the same European family and that’s why we have had such a long standing political commitment to the region” affirmed Mr **Clive Rumbold**, *Deputy Head of Western Balkans Division at European External Action Service*.

The common goal of European integration is a strategic investment from both sides, as it enhances stability and security, as well as increasing economic development and trade



“The Western Balkans are part of Europe. We all belong to the same European family. The common goal of European integration is a strategic investment from both sides in our shared interest.”

Clive Rumbold

opportunities, for all partners involved. Moreover, the process “goes back to the real meaning of the project of the EU, which is providing instruments for reconciliation and peace on our continent”, stated Mr Rumbold.

In this respect, as citizens both in the Western Balkans and in the European

Union aspire to live in a peaceful region, the bilateral issues between the countries that are working to join the Union must be solved in order for accession to occur.

Joining the European Union is a strictly merit-based process. It is a political choice and consequently it is “up to each Western Balkans partner to seize the opportunity” and implement the necessary reforms, “in particular on rule of law, justice and fundamental rights”, as underlined by the European Commission's February Strategy on the region.

Mr Rumbold stressed that there is clear commitment both from the EU and from the leaders in the region to the Western Balkans' EU perspective, and that despite slower and faster periods of progress, “all of the six partners have kept moving forward”.

Mr Rumbold highlighted that both Montenegro and Serbia are currently negotiating, moving steadily towards European Union membership and could complete the accession process by 2025. For both Serbia and Kosovo, progress on the EU-facilitated Dialogue through which the two sides aim at a legally-binding agreement on comprehensive normalization of relations remains key for progress on the European perspective.

The European Commission recommended in its package of reports in April this year that accession negotiations be opened with Albania and with the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. The Commission made equally clear that maintaining and deepening their current reform momentum will be decisive for further progress for both. Referring to the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Mr Rumbold applauded the “historic agreement” on the name issue with Greece, affirming that the country has made impressive steps “in addressing regional dynamics and bilateral relation with its neighbours”.

Mr Rumbold outlined that Bosnia and Herzegovina has the prospect of obtaining candidate status, and that work on the European Commission's Opinion on the country's EU membership application “is currently underway”.

Mr Rumbold stressed that the European Union's partnership with the Western Balkans is unique and built on the basis of mutual interest and a win-win situation for EU citizens and Western Balkans citizens, who share the same challenges and interests. What lies behind these interests, and unites the EU and the Western Balkans fundamentally, is that their citizens share the same values. The EU is not alone in being interested in the region but is the only global player that can protect the fundamental rights of individuals while bringing economic prosperity and better living standards. “This year can be a turning point” in the relations between the two regions, and therefore “we should seize the opportunity to build our future together, in our common interest”.

III. Albania

According to H.E. Mrs. **Suela Janina**, *Ambassador of the Republic of Albania to the EU*, the country and its citizens are “hoping for and expecting opening of accession talks”, a recognition of the achievements on the path of EU reform, and a confirmation of the



“Accession talks for Albania [...] will represent further incentives but at the same time it will be good news for the region as well: it is time for the European Union and for the Western Balkans not only to talk the talk but to walk the talk”

H.E. Mrs. **Suela Janina**

results obtained by the country in implementing the reforms in key areas.

Emphasis has been placed, amongst the achievements, on the role of the justice reform, which is expected to bring noticeable results. So far, the reforms have caused “nineteen judges and prosecutors to voluntary resign from the system, and approximately the same

number have been scrutinized”. Half of those scrutinized are now no longer considered as appropriate to be part of the system. It is a reform in which “we cannot see a precedent one in the entire region”, underlined H.E. Mrs. Janina.

Despite understanding that the discussions taking place within the European Union about the necessity for structural reform in Albania, and how this affects the accession process, the Albanian government does not consider the reform procedure as preventing the enlargement: “these are processes that can go along with each other...they are not excluding each other”, affirmed H.E. Mrs. Janina.

Accession talks will not only improve the orientation of Albania, but also would be an encouragement for the entire region, fostering regional cooperation in the Western Balkans and strengthening democracy, the rule of law and economic development.

It is necessary for both sides, highlighted H.E. Mrs. Janina, to go beyond the proposals and take the dialogue to the following level.

IV. Kosovo

Kosovo has shown “really impressive progress, especially in how to handle minority policies” proving that a successful minority policy is possible in the region, emphasized Mr **Thomas Waitz**, *Vice Chair of European Parliament Delegation to Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina*. He welcomed the



“Yes, in theory there is a certain implementation of laws that apply and comply with the rules that we have in Europe, but the question whether they are put in practice as they theoretically should is very often to be answered with no or partly no”

Thomas Waitz

“generational change” which is taking place in the country “between the generation that has participated in the war and the generation that grew up or started their career after the war”.

However, despite the progress of the country, the “gap between theory and

practice” endures, especially on the issues of the environment, civil society and media freedom, where despite applying a law that complies with the European Union regulation on a theoretical level; the lack of observation of EU requirements is still noticeable. Crucial aspects for the country are, as outlined by Mr Waitz and Mr Kukan, aside from the necessary reforms on rule of law and the national economy, the implementation of a legally binding comprehensive agreement on the normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia. Referring to this, both Serbia and Kosovo are expected to implement the 2015 agreement on energy and association of communities in Kosovo.

Regarding the successful policies that the country has implemented, Mr **Fitor Murati**, *First Secretary of Embassy of the Republic of Kosovo in Brussels*, raised the underexposed topic of visa liberalization, a “very important issue for Kosovo and especially for its citizens and for keeping this credibility of the enlargement process alive”. Having fulfilled the European Union’s conditions on the matter, the government of Kosovo would like to give the possibility of the freedom of movement to its citizens in order to keep the country moving towards the European Union.

“We are trying to become part of the European Union, one of the main fundamental values of EU is the freedom of movements and we are not able to move freely in Europe”

Fitor Murati



V. Bosnia and Herzegovina

Despite having the prospect of obtaining candidate status “Bosnia is the state [within the] Western Balkans that has the least perspective to an accession yet”, Mr Waitz stated. In particular, the concern rises from the underexposed difficulties the country is experiencing in designing a suitable minority policy.

“The only ones that are left behind in that state without actual accession to neighbour states or to the EU, is the so-called Muslim believing population and I think this is a situation that should really [...] worry us, because I think if we want to give a perspective we should treat people equally”

Thomas Waitz

In fact, as the Serbian minority has the possibility to apply for a Serbian passport and the Croatian minority already has a European Union passport; so the Muslim Bosnian population can be considered as being left behind. This problem should be solved, Mr Waitz noted, as the European Union should treat people equally beyond their religious affiliation; and if they do not, then the Union could face an increase in Turkish and Saudi influence in the country.

VI. former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

As Clive Rumbold underlined, “the country has made impressive steps in addressing regional dynamics and bilateral relations with its neighbours, most recently with the historic agreement on the name issue with Greece”, signed in June.

Nevertheless, the positive spirit in welcoming the agreement was “not shared by everybody”, as Mr **Alojz Peterle**, *Chair of European Parliament Delegation to former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia*, stressed.



“It is quite a politically demanding process, but it seems that we should take into account the consequences if the agreement is not endorsed. Who and when will be able to come with a better solution?”

Alojz Peterle

In fact, the agreement will “have many technical consequences because many things will have to be changed” noting the particularly sensitive issue of amending

the constitution. Mr Peterle also went on to note that it was essential to remember the fact that some of the European Union member states may consider this achievement as a “problem for [the] deepening of European integration before enlargement”, which underlined that “what the two prime ministers did definitely led to a new momentum, and now the political question is whether this agreement will be endorsed by the two sides”.

Whenever the agreement is finally endorsed, Mr Peterle confirmed that, for the former Republic of Macedonia, it would imply joining the NATO and beginning accession talks to join the Union.

The strategic importance of enlargement towards the Western Balkans need to be shared by the main players: hence, the European Union has to be united, credible and responsible as “we cannot have strong European perspective for Western Balkans with [a] weak

Brussels”. In this respect, the Austrian Presidency of the Council of the European Union is expected to further encourage the move towards enlargement, since the historical familiarity between the Western Balkans and Wien.

Prior to the Austrian Presidency, the issue of EU integration of Western Balkans had been “amongst the main priorities of the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union”, as Mr **Angel Dzhambazki**, *Vice Chair of European Parliament Delegation to the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia*, underlined.

The Bulgarian presidency organized the first European Union – Western Balkans Summit after the one held in Thessaloniki in 2003 and the government has managed to improve



“Internal reforms as well as in the attitude of the Republic of Macedonia internationally are the main driver behind the recent progress of the country”

Angel Dzhambazki

the momentum for the future accession of Macedonia, which relies on the reforms undertaken by the country.

The key role played by Bulgaria in the mediation between Greece and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia in their long-standing name dispute

“had [encouraged] the first step in [the] Treaty for Friendship, Good Neighborly Relations and Cooperation signed in 2015 by Bulgaria and Macedonia”, stressed Mr Dzhambazki.

The name deal is a progress that the Bulgarian government considers soon “will open the door for a real EU accession perspective for Macedonia”, boosting the investment and economic growth.

VII. Montenegro

Montenegro is expected by the European Commission to start the process of accession to the European Union in 2025, as Mr **Jozo Rados**, *Member of European Parliament Delegation to Montenegro*, indicated. He stated that the country “adopted all the



“From Western Balkans the European Union can get stability or instability”

Jozo Rados

recommendation from the EU”, implementing a unique legislation, however, the probable issue would be following-up on implementation.

The peculiarity of the Montenegrin political scene is its fragmentation, which, if not addressed properly, could destabilize the European Union once the country joins it.

Stressing the importance of media freedoms, Mr Rados raised concerns over the “the independence of the main broadcaster” and asked the European Union to act against the government’s interference in the media environment, and that “it is important remains independent”.

The *Substitute of European Parliament Delegation to Montenegro* Ms **Isabella De Monte** assured that the country made progress for European Union membership besides joining NATO in June 2017.



“The Western Balkans should not be only ‘stabilitocracies’ but first of all democracies”

Isabella De Monte

However, many challenges endure on the path to European integration; for instance, the current status of the rule of law and media freedoms, but also the fight against corruption, organized crime, and the unemployment rate amongst young people.

Furthermore, Ms De Monte emphasized that “the properties seized by the former regime in Montenegro [have] not always [been] returned to [their] owners, despite a restitution law issued in 2004”; the subsequent neglect of fundamental rights of private property is also noted to be in contrast to the European Union standards on the matter.

Staying with the issue of private property, “the current governments’ appetite for foreign investments in Montenegro’s construction market is a matter of concern”, and as a result of it, “properties are sold to foreign investors coming from countries as Serbia, Russia, China and United Arab Emirates, without fair compensation”, Ms De Monte said.

“Montenegro must have not only the legislation but also a conduct complying with the European criteria in reference to fundamental rights”, stated Ms De Monte, who called on the European Union to evaluate the country’s process in reforms “not only from the economic point of view, but by respecting transparency and democratic values”. Besides, in the enlargement process “the European Parliament should have a more representative role”, to better control the process.

On behalf of the Ambassador of Montenegro in Belgium H.E. Mr. Šarkić Bojan, Ms **Nataša Jovović**, *Minister Counsellor at the Mission of Montenegro in the European Union*, expressed her satisfaction in her country’s government in regards to the increased attention on enlargement. She reaffirmed the commitment of Montenegro to European integration: “we are intensively working on our negotiating commitments”, underlined Ms Jovović referring to the commitment against

“We are facing now the most demanding of phases of our European integration and all our efforts are directed to that end, with a particular focus on the rule of law area”

Nataša Jovović

corruption and organized crime, in infrastructure development, and “in enhancing media environment and the protection and promotion of media freedom”. Regarding media freedoms, Ms Jovović assured that the case of the attack on journalist Olivera Lakic was of “a high priority [to] the authorities, who have been ordered to devote all [of] their available resources in resolving this case and bringing the perpetrators to justice”. Furthermore, the Montenegrin government is working on a solution that will guarantee the independence of public broadcasting through a public consultation process involving all stakeholders implied.

VIII. Serbia

Mr **Eduard Kukan**, *Chair of European Parliament Delegation to Serbia*, confirmed that the country is “making progress in the necessary reforms for the integration process”,



“In the field of alignment to the European Union Foreign Policy, Serbia has led much to be desired”

Eduard Kukan

admitting, however, that “the pace does not always match our expectations”.

The most expected reforms are the ones regarding the judicial system and public administration; the European Parliament also requires a greater effort from the Serbian government in addressing the issues of civil liberties, freedom of media, fight against organized crime and

corruption. Mr Kukan also expressed disappointment towards President Macron’s approach on Western Balkans enlargement plan, stating that there was no need to choose between European Union reform and enlargement.

Concerning security, “Serbia remains one of the biggest non-EU contributors to EU military missions and counter terrorism missions”, a sign of the “close cooperation with the European Union in the field of security and defence”,

In the field of regional cooperation, it was noted that Serbia is actively improving its bilateral relations with Albania and Kosovo, and that this could “contribute positively to the development of the whole region”. However, as Ms De Monte highlighted, Serbia first needs to conclude and implement a legally binding agreement with Pristina and solve the border disputes with Kosovo and Montenegro before joining the European Union.

Serbia is experiencing the involvement of different foreign actors within its territory: the European Unions’ presence in the region is focused on rule of law, trade and human rights, while American interests lie primarily in national security, as a result of Serbia’s position between Eastern Europe and Central Asia in the path of immigration and organized crime routes. China’s regional interests are focussed on investment into infrastructure, as well as its hopes to create a hub for the “One Belt One Road” initiative within the Western Balkans. Russian interests are primarily in regional “energy politics, and the possible use of Serbia as a foreign policy tool”, Kukan highlighted.

With regard to the widespread interests of geopolitical players, Mr Kukan said that “Serbia is trying to balance”, but that “progress towards EU accession should eventually bring the country [to]...align its foreign policy with the European Union”. “In the field of alignment to the European Union Foreign Policy, Serbia has left much to be desired”, he concluded.

Referring to Turkish influence in Serbia and across the Western Balkans, Mr **Ugur Tok**, from *Platform for Peace and Justice*, recalled the visit of Turkish President Erdogan to Belgrade, which was then identified by the President as a “milestone for the Balkan–Turkey relations”. The involvement of Turkey within the region was noted due to the fact that, “in the first half of 2018, Mr Erdogan hosted eight foreign leaders, four of them being

from this region”. The Turkish government, in fact, “[requested] illegal operations across the Balkans states, including [the] illegal deportation of opposition figures, Kurds, leftists, Gulenists, and the confiscation of Gulenist institutions”, which are accused by the government of being responsible for the failed coup d’état of July 2016. “Turkish authorities [at] election rallies proudly announced what they did in [the] Balkan states”, highlighting Turkish involvement within the region which, “in the worst scenarios” meant the abduction of people from Balkan states, as happened in Kosovo.

Mr Tok underlined that the “European Union should take more proactive precautions in protecting democracies in the region”.

“Illegal operations not only distort the new justice mechanism in these countries but also increase Turkish government’s power grab over these small countries”

Ugur Tok



IX. Contributors

Referring to the importance of the European Union reforms already mentioned by other speakers, Ms **Milena Harito**, *Former Minister of State for Innovation and Public Administration of Albania*, agreed on its importance, as “people in EU [no longer] know



“The support Europe is giving is very important but on the other side the political support with the opening of negotiations is as important as the financial support”

Milena Harito

why they need Europe. On the other [hand], in the Western Balkans people know very well why they need Europe”. In Western Balkans countries, society is, according to Ms Harito, divided between two factions: the progressive forces, which are favourable towards the European Union because of the

freedoms, and the values it represents, and other forces who oppose the European Union. In this respect, “Europe should help the progressive forces in our countries...and support them” in line with the Sofia Agenda, working on a range of topics such as the rule of law, security, migration, and socio-economic development, as well as the connectivity and digital agenda; but besides that, the Union should provide concrete political support such as the opening of negotiations.

On the topic of reform of the European Union “I was very disappointed that President Macron did not take the opportunity to make a strong case for enlargement in the run-up



“I look at the region and I am not so terribly hopeful that this year really is proving to be a turning point”

Toby Vogel

of the Sofia Summit, and at the Summit itself”, said Mr **Toby Vogel**, *Policy Analyst at Centre for European Policy Studies* in Brussels. By “repeating the old, traditional French position”, President Macron called for the deepening of the European Union

before its widening, despite the two not being “exclusive or exclusionary processes, [which] could very well go in parallel”.

His disappointment in France is due to the fact that, not only is “France...one of the problem cases” in opening negotiations with Albania, but also in the possible public opinion issues if it “[looks] like the French people might have a say in whoever wants to join the European Union next”.

Moving on to the specificities of the region, he noted that “it was an inspiration to see the political change in Macedonia” that led to the agreement on the name issue with Greece, and Mr Vogel expressed his hope that this deal would be ratified and lead to the opening of EU membership talks with Macedonia, despite those in both countries European People’s Party affiliates protesting against the deal.

Nevertheless, “across the region, with the exception of Albania and Macedonia, we are seeing [a] very worrying process of increasing limits to media freedom, increasing restriction of space for civil society, and something that some people call democratic backsliding”. In this regard, he said, the case of Bosnia is “in many ways a much harder case than the relations between Kosovo and Serbia”, as “with Bosnia things are just less clear-cut, we don’t know what the endgame could be”.

Therefore “the European Commission, the External Action Service and the EU member states need to think very hard what to do about Bosnia”, Mr Vogel concluded.

Referring to the necessity of “walking the talk” expressed by H.E. Mrs. Suela Janina, Mr **André De Munter**, *Policy Analyst at the European Parliament*, highlighted the ambivalent position of the European institutions towards the enlargement towards the



“It is time we held both sides accountable for the situation”

André De Munter

Western Balkans: “I had the impression, when reading the Strategy, that the Commission was also oblivious [to] its 2015 Enlargement Strategy, whether there is much more explicit talk about reconciliation and whether there is also reference to the Vienna declaration on bilateral disputes. Why is this reference not included in the Western Balkans Strategy of last

February? Because it is a very important declaration which was made, and nothing was done with it. Since 2015, all neighbouring EU member states were invited to co-sign this declaration and none of them did. It is time we held both sides accountable for the situation.”

The Treaty for Friendship, Good Neighbourly Relations and Cooperation between Bulgaria and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia was “a catalyst for the name dispute issue between Macedonia and Greece”. He also stressed the importance of the Jean Monnet Dialogue, which works “as a forum to maintain pressure to make the best of this ‘historic’ agreement”, and through which “the European Parliament continues to be very much involved”. Despite applauding the agreement reached by the two countries, concerns are raised as, on taking a closer look at the agreement, “there are some niches that will make

implementation very difficult”, and “thinking of all the language used on Cyprus, we also used ‘momentum’, ‘historic window of opportunity’, ‘now or never’ and we see that despite that, it collapsed”.

Pivoting to Montenegro, he referred to the “warnings from the European Union and despite three consecutive mentions in the report of the European Commission that there is no progress on media freedom, things are deteriorating”. According to Mr De Munter, the recent case of the attack to Olivera Lakic, an investigative journalist for the newspaper Vijesti, is the confirmation of the difficult situation for media freedom not only in the country but, as the evidences showed by Mr Rados with regard to Serbia, in the entire region. Furthermore, Mr De Munter indicated the environmental issue as “another little-known issue by the European authorities”.

Mentioning Serbia and the slow pace of progress revealed by Mr Kukan, Mr De Munter proposed a hypothesis referring to the balance clause, “which [would] mean that, if things do not evolve rapidly enough in chapters 23 and 24, the opening of additional chapters may be temporarily blocked” to encourage an increase in the current speed of the process.

Lastly, “could we have a bit more clarity in order to not have a major effort and arrive at the legally binding agreement which then encounters a lot of political stumble?”, Mr De Munter asked the panel, addressing the possibility of non-recognition of Kosovo from one of the other five EU member states which do not currently recognize it as a state. However, as Mr Kukan stressed, the perception is that the pact will be a compromise-based agreement for all the actors involved.

“Despite our tendency to see enlargement primarily in institutional terms, the policy has always been and still remains under the firm control of the member states” Ms **Corina Stratulat**, *Senior Policy Analyst at European Policy Centre* interjected, adding that



“It is hard to imagine how the Balkans will stay on track if the Member States fail to raise to the occasion now and reassure the Balkan countries that their recent efforts and their recent political courage have not been in vain”

Corina Stratulat

“proof of that [would] ultimately be found in the national politics of enlargement”.

She continued by stating that “Bulgaria and Austria did adopt enlargement as a priority for their respective Council presidencies, but [that] there was no endorsement of the European

Commission’s strategy for the region by the member states”. However, it is important to note “that the position of the European Union on enlargement should not be looked at in monolithic terms” as the individual member states cannot be considered a united bloc.

The implication here is, firstly, that while some member states “may see a logic to expansion [within] the region” or enlargement as a possibility to “help them to further their own ambitions and goals within the Union”, other Member States may “worry about crime, immigration, minorities above anything else”. Therefore, she noted that the

“individual positions of EU capitals becomes enormously important for the overall success of the policy, as the attitudes that Member States [embrace] delay or wreck the process”.

“The right balance between incentives and conditions became ever more difficult to strike [one] individual member states decide to diverge in functional terms. Strategic security interests can take priority over democratic promotion, and call for a rapid integration of the region, but this actually ignores that democracies are the most suitable qualities to solve security and state building from problems”, Ms Stratulat stated.

The difficulties that the European Union is currently experiencing as it attempts to reconcile the different priorities for the region, “has facilitated the deterioration of democratic standards throughout the region and has led to the consolidation of strongmen”, Ms Stratulat highlighted, and furthermore “has made easier for other actors, most noticeably Russia, to meddle in the region”.

Ultimately, “the present time is not only a reminder of the risks and weaknesses of the EU enlargement policy towards the Western Balkans, but also a chance to prove that past lessons have been internalized”, concluded Ms Stratulat.

X. Conclusions

During the round table, it was underlined that the Western Balkans countries are proceeding towards the common goal of European integration, albeit with different paces amongst the countries in the region.

Referring to Albania, the roundtable highlighted the progress made by the country in the key areas identified by the European Commission, and as the necessity for opening the accession talks with the country was emphasized. In particular, the importance of judicial reform within the country in order to achieve the goal of European integration was stressed.

Regarding Kosovo, the progress on the adoption of successful minority policies received much praise, while the necessity for further development with regard to the issues of rule of law, economy, environment, civil society and media freedom were underlined, alongside the need to improve the dialogue with Serbia.

On the topic of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, the decision of the European Commission to recommend the opening of negotiations with the country was of a primary interest. The country's efforts on European integration were seen as encouraging, both through results of its reforms and the results of the steps taken toward improving its relations with its neighbours. The recent agreement on the name issue with Greece was a highlight of this.

With regards to Montenegro, it was emphasized that the country had made good progress, and was expected to complete the accession process in 2025. However, many challenges concerning the rule of law, the fight against corruption and organized crime, and unemployment have yet to be addressed by relevant reforms. Concerns were also on the cases stressed during the event regarding the situation of private property, external investment and freedom of media and of expression, which are experiencing a backsliding in the region. The necessity of adopting European Union legislation and complying with EU criteria in reference to fundamental rights was also raised.

Moving on to the case of Serbia, which is also expected to complete the accession process in 2025, there was confirmation country is making progress in the necessary reforms for the integration process, specifically in regards to the judicial system and public administration. Serbia is expected to intensify its efforts in addressing the issues concerning the civil liberties, freedom of media, fight to organized crime and corruption, since the current pace in the reforms does not match all the expectations. The country's efforts towards regional cooperation, which is proving to play a decisive role in its relations with Albania and Kosovo, is expected to positively contribute to development across the region, despite the interests of other geopolitical actors such as Russia, the United States and China.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is currently considered to be the state within the Western Balkans that has the lowest level of progress in regards to accession to the European Union. Concerns were raised with regards to the difficulties that the country is experiencing in designing a suitable minority policy, which is currently believed to exclude a large part of the population, and leaves room for external actors to influence certain populations.

It was underlined that joining the European Union is a choice that nation states must commit themselves to, and that it was up to each Western Balkans state to seize the opportunity and implement the necessary reforms.

In this respect, the prospects are mainly optimistic as, overall, there have been proofs of commitment from the leaders in the region, and despite slower and faster periods of progress, all the six partners have kept moving forward. At the same time, the European Union's commitment to the region must be upheld by all of the member states, and all parties involved must share the final decision when it comes to the enlargement process.

In this regard, the necessity of balancing the demands for reform within the European Union whilst correctly managing the enlargement process is a difficult one. However if the EU is to both thrive and expand to cover all of the states that comprise the European continent, then the EU must avoid privileging one to the detriment of the other.

Both the European Union and the Western Balkan states will benefit from the enlargement process, but it is still essential for the Union to show an eagerness to advance the process through unity and by seeking swift harmonization of 27 member states' position with regards to the Western Balkans enlargement.

VOCAL EUROPE

RUE DE LA SCIENCE 14B, 1040 BRUSSELS

TEL: +32 02 588 00 14

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