

EU enlargement to the Western Balkans in 2022 – some progress in sight?

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2022 has been a turbulent and challenging year for the whole continent of Europe following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It has brought the significant developments to the enlargement policy, bringing it once again to the spotlight, primarily with Ukraine and Moldova becoming new candidates for EU membership. As we will see in the following analysis the Western Balkan region has made very limited progress.¹ However, there were two important developments. First, after years of waiting, Bosnia and Herzegovina was granted candidate status at the end of the year. Secondly, the deadlock regarding start of accession negotiations for North Macedonia and Albania was finally resolved. In this short overview the most significant developments will be featured together with the analysis of the EU Commission Enlargement Strategy prepared annually, accompanied by thy assessment of the progress of Balkan candidates and Turkey on their way to the EU accession.²

All the countries of the WB region were given prospects of EU membership almost 20 years ago at the Thessaloniki summit in 2003, but the long EU integration process has since been hampered by numerous factors.³ In its Enlargement Strategy for the 2018, the European Commission anticipated possible WB enlargement for 2025, but only for Montenegro and Serbia, stressing that the EU's enlargement policy must be “part and parcel” of the larger strategy to strengthen the Union by that year.⁴ New accession negotiation methodology was devised in 2020, and all candidates are now following the same structure of six clusters comprising EU *acquis*/policies under which the prospective accession is being negotiated.⁵ As decided back in 2020, the political dialog between EU-Western Balkan countries has been intensified in the form of regular summits, two of

¹ For the overview of 2020 developments please refer to: M. Milenković, *EU Enlargement Strategy 2020 – Paving the Way for Differentiated Integration?*, 2020, available at: www.osorin.it/uploads/model_4/files/54_item_2.pdf?v=1608022440.

EU Western Balkan enlargement in 2021 was covered for this observatory in: M. Milenković, *EU Enlargement to the Western Balkans – limited progress in 2021*, 2021, available at: www.osorin.it/uploads/model_4/files/94_item_2.pdf?v=1639558069.

² European Commission, *2022 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy*, 12 October 2022, COM(2022) 528 final.

³ M. Milenković, *EU Enlargement, Conditionality Policy and Prospects for the Integration of the Western Balkans*, in L. Montanari (ed.), *L'allargamento dell'Unione europea e le transizioni costituzionali nei Balcani occidentali*, Editoriale Scientifica, 2022, pp. 61-75.

⁴ No projection was offered at the time for remaining four (potential) candidates – North Macedonia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo(*) – none of which had opened negotiations at that date. See further: European Commission, *A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans*, 6 February 2018, COM(2018) 65 final.

⁵ European Commission, *Enhancing the accession process - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans*, 5 February 2020, COM(2020) 57 final. For a more detailed analysis see: M. Milenković, *EU Enlargement Strategy 2020 – Paving the Way for Differentiated Integration?*, in *OSORIN*, 2020, www.osorin.it/uploads/model_4/files/54_item_2.pdf?v=1608022440.

which took place in 2022 – in June preceding the European Council meeting in Brussels⁶ and the second one in December in Tirana.⁷ Meeting of this format were previously held just before the Council Summit, and it was the first time in Tirana that it was held separately and hosted by the Western Balkan nation. In addition, on 6 October 2022, the first meeting of the European Political Community took place in Prague bringing together leaders from both EU member and various non-member states with economic situation, energy, climate and security on the agenda.⁸ As it was underlined from the onset: “Such a framework will not replace existing EU policies and instruments, notably enlargement, and will fully respect the European Union’s decision-making autonomy”.⁹ There are some more cautious views when it comes to the role of EPC and the Balkans: “Overly marketed, the EPC risks propagating delusive expectations among would-be Member states. Before the next meeting takes place in Chisinau, the Western Balkans need to gain clarity on the EPC's purpose, design and functioning, as well as the role the EU is to play therein”.¹⁰ It remains to be seen to what extent EPC will be developed and how will it supplement other EU initiatives.

Year 2022 also saw a final resolution of deadlock over the initiation of accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania. The formal opening of negotiations with these two countries in March 2020 was a major development,¹¹ but no concrete progress was made after that, i.e., no clusters have been opened by the member states for more than two years mainly due to demands of Bulgaria towards the North Macedonia in regard to the position of Bulgarian minority and disputes over the Macedonian language.¹² Finally, after the French brokered political settlement was adopted by the parliament of North Macedonia.¹³ Immediately after, on 19 July 2022 the first intergovernmental conferences were held between the European Commission and two countries signaling the next stage of accession and beginning of the screening process (examination of EU *acquis* alignment) for the two countries. The year was rounded up by Bosnia and Herzegovina finally gaining the status of EU candidate country on 15 December after applying for membership relatively late compared to other Balkan states back in 2016.¹⁴

As in previous years, the Commission has published the Enlargement package consisting of Communication on overall strategy with highlights of assessment for individual candidates and seven individual country reports. This is the last package (set of documents) prepared only for Western Balkans and Turkey, as Ukraine and Moldova

⁶ See further: European Council, *European Council Conclusion*, 2022: www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2022/06/23.

⁷ See further: www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2022/12/06.

⁸ See further: www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2022/10/06.

⁹ European Council, *European Council Conclusion*, 2022: www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2022/06/23.

¹⁰ See further: F. Marciacq, *The European Political Community and the Western Balkans - Strategic thinking or misleading hope?*, Fridrich Ebert Stiftung, 2022: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sarajevo/19790.pdf>.

¹¹ Council of the European Union, *Council conclusions on enlargement and stabilisation and association process – Albania and the Republic of North Macedonia*, 25 March 2020, COM(2020) 57 final.

¹² For the overview of the disputes see inter al: <https://balkaninsight.com/tag/bulgaria-north-macedonia-dispute>.

¹³ See: www.reuters.com/world/europe/n-macedonia-votes-resolve-dispute-with-bulgaria-clears-way-eu-talks-2022-07-16.

¹⁴ See: [https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/gac/2022/12/13](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/gac/2022/12/13).

will be included from next year. It was outlined by the Commission: “The geopolitical challenges, in particular Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, have also brought the EU and the Western Balkans closer together and have required full solidarity with one another. The EU has integrated the Western Balkans into its own food and energy security initiatives in response to the war. The region is part of the European food security crisis preparedness and response mechanism, and has been invited to participate in the EU’s joint gas, liquefied natural gas and hydrogen purchases”.¹⁵

Twenty years after the start of Enlargement it is obvious that no immediate prospects exist for the region to join the Union, however the Commission did stress that: “Much is being done to accelerate the integration of the Western Balkans, given their status as candidate countries and potential candidates. This is being done through participation in EU programmes and agencies, but also through the implementation of the Stabilisation and Association Agreements (SAAs), the Economic and Investment Plan (EIP), inclusive regional cooperation frameworks like the EU strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian region and the EU strategy for the Danube region, and potentially through regional economic integration.”¹⁶ Indeed it can be observed that Commission is starting to look at the current relations with the countries of the region as a form of differentiated integration.¹⁷ As noted in the document: “The stabilisation and association process already provides for considerable integration in advance of the date of accession ... other regional agreements notably on the Transport Community and the Energy Community offer considerable scope for integration”.¹⁸ In the latest Enlargement Strategy Commission stressed that “the Western Balkans need to step up their efforts and muster the political will to resolve issues hampering the implementation of the Common Regional Market, which will maximise the benefits of the Economic and Investment Plan”.¹⁹ On the similar note commenting on the other regional project between three Western Balkan countries aimed at removal of trade barriers and gradual development of the common market in the region: “The Open Balkan initiative launched by Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia can play a positive role in the process, provided it is based on EU rules and remains inclusive towards all Western Balkans partners”.²⁰

Assessing advancement of Balkan candidates in area of EU *acquis*, Commission concluded that: “Enlargement countries are expected to advance steadily on their respective reform agendas in the areas of the ‘fundamentals’, pursuing reforms and demonstrating concrete progress in the rule of law, the economy, the functioning of democratic institutions, and public administration reform. *Securing solid and irreversible achievements in all these areas remains decisive for meeting the requirements of EU membership*”.²¹ (underlined by the author) This is building on a Commission long lasting argument that the prospective of membership are indeed primarily in the hands of the

¹⁵ European Commission, 2022 *Communication on EU Enlargement Policy*, 12 October 2022, COM(2022) 528 final, 2.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

¹⁷ See further: M. Milenković, *Trajectories of differentiated integration for the Western Balkans*, in J. Trondal, S. Gänzle, B. Laruth (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Differentiated Integration*, Routledge, 2022, pp. 551-564.

¹⁸ European Commission, 2022 *Communication on EU Enlargement Policy*, COM(2022) 528 final, p. 3.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 5

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

countries that want to join the Union. This approach stresses the firm commitment of countries to undertake reforms in crucial sectors, which governments are seldom not ready or not able to do. To this regard, it is noted as many times before that: “across the Western Balkans and Turkey, judicial institutions remain exposed to many challenges. In particular, undue external pressures on the judiciary continued, undermining the independence of judges and prosecutors, compromising the overall institutional balance and ultimately affecting the separation between state powers.”²² Similarly, it is concluded that: “Fundamental rights are largely enshrined in the legislation in the Western Balkans, but challenges remain in ensuring their effective implementation. The policy framework is gradually being completed, notably on anti-discrimination and fighting gender-based violence, but systemic gaps remain in funding measures promoting and protecting human rights”.²³

In terms of economic reforms, it is Commission assessment that: “The economic outlook is surrounded by very high uncertainty due primarily to the economic fallout of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, which is expected to have a negative impact on economies although in a varying degree, reflecting differences in: each country’s direct and indirect trade links; each country’s energy intensity; the significance of food price inflation; and the role of tourism”.²⁴ It is found that region is in general, moderately prepared in many areas of the internal market. Importantly for the region experiencing a sharp demographic decline it is warned that: “Structural mismatches in skills persist, due to weak education systems and underinvestment in human capital. Reforms and investments in the education systems and upskilling and reskilling are key to improve the labour market situation and addressing emerging shortages of skilled labour”.²⁵ Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia are found moderately prepared in the area of energy, while it is estimated that, an accession frontrunner, Montenegro is at a good level of preparation.²⁶ Since 2020 the EU has stepped up its economic commitments to the region by introducing Economic and investment Plan for the Balkans²⁷ together with the Green Agenda for the Balkans.²⁸ In 2022 the further commitment to the region was made by providing one billion Energy Support Package for the Western Balkans, one half aimed to help with short term consequences of the energy crisis in Europe.²⁹

In the area of foreign, security and defense policy it is stressed in the report that: “North Macedonia made very good progress, Albania and Montenegro made good progress, Bosnia and Herzegovina made some progress, and Serbia showed backsliding.”³⁰ It is further underlined that: “Russia’s war against Ukraine has further underlined the importance of CFSP alignment as a key aspect of the EU integration process.”³¹ In the conclusions of the document, it is highlighted: “Russia’s brutal invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has fundamentally changed the geopolitical landscape and is putting the rules-based order to the

²² *Ibidem*, p. 9.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 23.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 24.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 26.

²⁷ See further: www.wbif.eu/eip.

²⁸ See further: www.rcc.int/greenagenda.

²⁹ See further: www.wbif.eu/news-details/1-billion-energy-support-package-western-balkans-approved-5-december.

³⁰ European Commission, 2022 *Communication on EU Enlargement Policy*, COM(2022) 528 final, p. 26.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 33.

test. In this context, the EU's enlargement policy is more than ever a geostrategic investment in long term peace, stability, and security of the whole of our continent and is consequently featuring high on the EU's political agenda".³² Finally, it is concluded that: "The current geopolitical challenges call for strengthening our cooperation with the region, whose security is ultimately tied up with that of the EU itself".³³

Overall, it can be concluded that in a year which brought war to Europe, no major developments in terms of Western Balkan enlargement occurred. However, some level of increased commitment on the side of the EU and member states can be observed. Bearing in mind the crucial political moment, the EU should however act more decisively and use all possible ways under current Treaties to integrate the Balkans if no immediate membership prospects can be offered. These (differentiated) integration modalities should be extended, so as to guarantee continuation of reforms in the region, prevent further democratic backsliding and firmly secure it stays part of the Union of values.

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³² *Ibidem*, p. 33.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 35.