



EU Enlargement to the Western Balkans in 2024 – glimmers of hope for the region’s integration

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The year 2024 marks two decades of the historic “Big Enlargement” of the EU to Central and Eastern European countries. It was a year in which Western Balkan candidates entered the third decade of their EU accession process as prospects were offered in 2003. Yet, the EU integration process has since been long, and hampered by numerous factors, most notably enlargement fatigue and bilateral conditionality¹. As recently noted by Betchev: «Not that long ago, enlargement was a second-order priority for the EU: never off the radar but never really a top agenda item either»². 2024 is the year when the first and only of the Western Balkan countries that have joined the EU back in 2013 – Croatia – also became a member of the Eurozone and Schengen zone, symbolically completing the integration process.

The integration story continues for the rest of the region, with a bit less uncertainty than previously. As already discussed in the previous OSORIN analysis³ Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has returned the European Union’s attention to its enlargement policy, reigniting discussions on EU integration for Western Balkan candidates⁴. Emerson underlines: «The EU’s enlargement process is at a cross-roads. There have been some positive steps recently, but these are not in themselves credibly answering the question whether the process is really on track for a new round of accessions, even over a long-term horizon; or whether the long and complex procedures are masking a political reality that the process is subject to fundamental blockage factors in the hands of various member states»⁵.

The year 2024 further was marked with some positive developments for some of the WB candidates. Following the Council’s decision that Montenegro had fulfilled the interim benchmarks for the rule of law chapters, the intergovernmental conference on 26

¹ Miloš Milenković, *Using ethnology-based intangible heritage safeguarding as an alternative to culturalized EU conditionality in the Western Balkans*, in Laura Montanari, Alessia-Ottavia Cozzi, Marko Milenković, Irena Ristić (eds.), *We, the people of the United Europe - Reflections on the European state of mind (Atti del Convegno internazionale Udine 28/29 giugno 2022)*, Napoli, 2022, 225-234.

² Dimitar Betchev, *Can EU Enlargement Work?*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 20 June 2024: <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/06/can-eu-enlargement-work?lang=en>.

³ Marko Milenković, *EU enlargement to the Western Balkans in 2022 – some progress in sight?*, 2023: https://www.osorin.it/uploads/model_4/files/129_item_2.pdf?v=1675070984.

⁴ Jelena Džankić, Simonida Kacarska, Soeren Keil (eds.), *A Year Later: War in Ukraine and Western Balkan (Geo)Politics*, European University Institute, 2023, 155-164.

⁵ Michael Emerson, *EU Enlargement Issues for the Next Commission*, SCEEUS GUEST COMMENTARY NO. 3, 2024: <https://sceeus.se/en/publications/eu-enlargement-issues-for-the-next-commission/>.

June outlined the closing benchmarks for these chapters. This development was also coupled with the provisional closure of several negotiating chapters. Screening sessions with both Albania and North Macedonia were finalized by the end of 2023. On 15 October 2024, the fundamentals cluster (no. 1) was opened for Albania, finally breaking a deadlock of its accession talks. In March 2024, the European Council decided to initiate accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Commission was tasked with preparing the negotiating framework, to be adopted by the Council once Bosnia and Herzegovina fulfils all the steps outlined in the Commission's 2022 recommendations. Other candidates did not make progress in 2024 for a number of reasons, and mostly remain at the same position they were back in 2020 when the new negotiation methodology was introduced⁶.

As every year, the Commission came up with the regular Enlargement Strategy⁷ and individual countries' progress reports assessing their advancement in various areas of reforms and alignment with the *acquis* and EU policies. It is much more complex than previous similar documents as it now includes 10 candidates and potential candidates – Turkey, 6 from the Western Balkans – Montenegro, Serbia, North Macedonia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo* – as well as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia.

At the moment, Montenegrin government is hoping for the completion of the accession negotiations by 2026⁸, which would under usual dynamics seen with previous entrants lead to membership in 2028. As argued by Dabrowski: «Looking at the advancement of the negotiation process, it makes sense to set an indicative, not very distant date for Montenegro's accession to the EU in order to mobilise all parties involved as was done in the case of the 2004 Eastern Enlargement»⁹.

The same could be claimed for other countries, namely Serbia who is the second in line in terms of advancement of accession talks. Serbia has made no progress during the year, with no new clusters and chapters opened in 2024 but some reform progress recognised by the national progress report. As underlined by the Commission: «The authorities continued to declare EU membership as their strategic goal. The path towards opening further clusters with Serbia will depend in particular on the progress and pace of rule of law reforms and the normalisation of relations with Kosovo»¹⁰.

As observed by the Commission, Albania and North Macedonia have consistently reaffirmed their political commitment to EU integration, emphasizing reform progress as the foundation for advancing accession negotiations. Following the first intergovernmental conferences with both countries in July 2022, screening meetings for all six negotiation clusters were successfully concluded by December 2023. Based on the

⁶ For the overview of 2020 developments please refer to: Marko Milenković, *EU Enlargement Strategy 2020 – Paving the Way for Differentiated Integration?*, 2020: https://www.osorin.it/uploads/model_4/files/54_item_2.pdf?v=1608022440.

⁷ European Commission, 2024 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy, COM (2021) 644 final, 19 October 2021.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁹ Marek Dabrowski, *The European Union's Geopolitical Ambitions: Enlargement, Neighbourhood and Necessary Institutional Changes*, in *Intereconomics*, 2024, 327-331.

¹⁰ European Commission, 2024 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy, cit., 5.

Commission's screening reports, the Council communicated the benchmarks for opening negotiations on Cluster 1 (Fundamentals) to both countries in autumn 2023. By the end of 2023, Albania submitted its roadmaps on public administration reform and the rule of law, which enabled the opening of the Fundamentals cluster during the second inter-governmental conference in October 2024. Additionally, Albania submitted its roadmap on the functioning of democratic institutions in September 2024. As it was outlined by the Commission: «The Albanian government signalled their objective to close accession negotiations by the end of 2027 and the Commission is ready to support this ambitious objective»¹¹.

In December 2023, North Macedonia adopted roadmaps on public administration reform and the rule of law, but the action plan on the protection of minorities is still pending. Meanwhile, the Commission presented further screening reports for both countries to the Council: in May 2024 for Cluster 2 (Internal Market) and in October 2024 for Cluster 6 (External Relations) and Cluster 3 (Competitiveness and Inclusive Growth)¹². Yet, even though it was the first to get an EU candidate status North Macedonia's accession progress remains deadlocked.

In December 2023, the European Council, following the Commission's recommendation, decided to open accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina once the country meets the necessary membership criteria. According to the March 2024 Commission report, Bosnia and Herzegovina had made progress in adopting EU-related reforms. Following the Commission's recommendation, the European Council decided on 22 March 2024 to open EU accession negotiations¹³, however, as previous experiences of Albania and North Macedonia attest, the period till the opening of the first cluster of negotiations can be prolonged. Finally, 2024 was a year that marked the introduction of visa-free travel for Kosovo* passport holders, fourteen years after it was granted to other EU candidates.

An important 2024 development is Union's mid-term strategy for the region is "Growth Plan for the Western Balkans"¹⁴. It was conceived by the Commission in 2023 and adopted in 2024. A key component of this plan is the 6 billion EUR Reform and Growth Facility, comprising 1.5 billion of extra funding to the candidates on top of the existing pre-accession aid schemes and further up to 4.5 billion in favorable loans. The Growth Plan is designed to complement the Economic and Investment Plan for the region¹⁵, with the idea of supporting economic convergence with the EU and accelerating reforms crucial to the fundamentals of the accession process. As envisaged, it aims to gradually integrate the region into specific areas of the EU single market, contingent on progress in regional economic integration, alignment with relevant EU acquis, and the establishment of adequate administrative capacities and procedures¹⁶. As outlined by the

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹² See further: *ibid.*, 5.

¹³ See further: *ibid.*, 5-6.

¹⁴ Regulation (EU) 2024/1449 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on establishing the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans, 24 May 2024.

¹⁵ See further: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1811.

¹⁶ European Commission, 2024 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy, cit., 2.

Commission: «The implementation of the Growth Plan and the Facility is underway and has led to a significant political mobilisation in the region, recognising the substantive benefits the Growth Plan will bring. Five of the six beneficiaries have submitted their reform agendas to date, and they were approved by the Commission in October 2024. The corresponding prefinancing transfers are foreseen upon entry into force of the Facility and the loan agreements with each of the beneficiaries and fulfillment of the prefinancing conditions»¹⁷. The only country that was not able to prepare a Reform Agenda and submit it for approval by the European institutions was Bosnia and Herzegovina, reflecting the complex internal disagreements among ruling ethnic elites.

This new mid-term strategy for the region was clearly devised in the absence of immediate membership options. An important aspect of this evolving approach is the preparation of candidate countries for potential participation in the EU internal market, even without full EU membership. However, as noted by Mihajlovic and Macek: «There is no attempt to apply the logic of gradual accession in areas other than the single market and access to EU funds»¹⁸. This new perspective must, however, address the declining democratic and rule of law (RoL) standards in the Western Balkans. Current research highlights the high risk of ruling elites diverting EU funds without facing scrutiny or complying with EU core principles¹⁹. As recently noted by Betchev: «State capture and corruption are the most visible issues. Incumbent elites have been reluctant to hand over power to independent judiciaries and regulators, which could upset the elites' access to power and resources, undercut their clienteles, benefit their political competitors, and even result in jail sentences. The rule-of-law reforms are a potential disruption for these elites, who have a strong incentive to implement them selectively. That is true both of countries that are enthusiastic about membership and of those that lag behind»²⁰.

This new mechanism represents a novel approach in EU pre-accession conditionality policy and will serve as an important testing ground for similar legal and policy models with other candidate countries in the future. However, as underlined by the Commission: «The enlargement momentum has been coupled with a reinvigorated engagement with the relevant partners, particularly through their progressive integration into the EU single market. This integration is a facilitator (and not an alternative) to accession, by bringing even before accession the tangible socio-economic benefits of EU membership to the enlargement countries that are ready in specific areas»²¹. The Commission further underlined: «The region is fulfilling its ambition to create a Common Regional Market (CRM) that aims to ensure freedom of movement for people, services,

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁸ Milena Mihajlović, Lukáš Macek, *New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, Brief*, Jacques Delors Institute, March 2024: <https://institutdelors.eu/en/publications/new-growth-plan-for-the-western-balkans/>.

¹⁹ See further: Kalypso Nicolaidis, Nicolai von Ondarza, Sophia Russack, *The Radicality of Sunlight - Five Pathways to a More Democratic Europe*, CEPS, SWP, 2023: <https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/the-radicality-of-sunlight/>.

²⁰ Dimitar Betchev, *Can EU Enlargement Work?*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 20 June 2024: <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/06/can-eu-enlargement-work?lang=en>

²¹ European Commission, 2024 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy, cit., 1.

goods and capital. This will facilitate employment and trade and ease customs procedures between the partners»²².

2024 was a dynamic year for the EU enlargement process at large, and some glimmers of hope for the Western Balkans are present, mainly due to the steady progress of Montenegro towards membership and unblocking of the Albanian path to the EU integration. The Russian aggression against Ukraine brought a completely new (geo)political context in which enlargement is taking place, as three new candidates – Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia – are now also the part of the process. The war has thus redirected the focus once again to the enlargement for the Western Balkan and need to address the pressing issue of integration of the region²³. This however needs to be done having in mind that the EU used enlargement as a stabilization and security-building mechanism without guaranteeing membership as the end state²⁴.²⁴ Having in mind these different considerations, it is essential that concrete measures are offered to the Western Balkans and legal steps are taken to keep the region safe, stable and adherent to European values. In the absence of membership prospects in the near future, differentiated integration (DI) – widely used by the Union internally and externally – as increasingly demonstrating to be the suitable framework for the Europeanisation of the Western Balkans²⁵.

There is a growing consensus among EU members and institutions that new integration options should be developed for the region, and it seems that current enlargement policy initiatives offer a new mid-term vision (till 2030, the year mentioned as a possible date for new EU entries)²⁶ for preparing the region for potential membership and phasing in Western Balkan candidates into EU policies. This includes increased participation in EU programmes and initiatives, as well as access to enhanced funding from the Union. An important aspect of this evolving approach is the preparation of candidate countries for potential participation in the EU internal market, even without full EU membership.

²² *Ibid.*, 16.

²³ Marko Milenković, *Ukraine war: a push towards differentiated integration for the Western Balkans?* In Jelena Džankić, Simonida Kacarska, Soeren Keil (eds.), *A Year Later*, cit., 155-164.

²⁴ Veronica Anghel, Jelena Džankić, *Wartime EU: consequences of the Russia – Ukraine war on the enlargement process*, in *Journal of European Integration*, 2023, 487-501.

²⁵ Marko Milenković, *Trajectories of differentiated integration for the Western Balkans*, in Benjamin Leruth, Stephan Gänzle, Jarle Trondal (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Differentiated Integration in the European Union*. London, 2022, 551-564; Marko Milenković, *The Western Balkans and European Union enlargement – exploring possibilities of differentiated integration*, in Diane Fromage (ed.), *Redefining Membership: Differentiation in and outside the European Union*, Oxford, 2024, 273-290.

²⁶ Speech by President Charles Michel at the Bled Strategic Forum. European Council - Council of the European Union Michel, 28 August 2023: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/08/28/speech-by-president-charles-michel-at-the-bled-strategic-forum/>.

This policy shift is progressively framed as differentiation by the institutions²⁷ and in other prominent fora²⁸. However, there are also cautious views: «Despite this renewed attention, the initial momentum of EU enlargement is wearing off. While enlargement remains a worthwhile goal, the stakeholders involved will have to moderate their expectations. The EU will not expand rapidly in the coming years, although it may develop flexible forms of integration with membership hopefuls»²⁹.

We can conclude that 2024 was a vibrant year for the EU Enlargement, with glimmers of hope for the future of EU integration in the Balkans.

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²⁷ European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council on pre-enlargement reforms and policy reviews, COM(2024) 146 final, 20 March 2024, 20.

²⁸ Franco-German Working Group on EU Institutional Reform, *Sailing on High Seas: Reforming and Enlarging the EU for the 21st Century. Report*, 19 September 2023, 36. <https://institutdelors.eu/en/publications/sailing-on-high-seas-reforming-and-enlarging-the-eu-for-the-21st-century/>.

²⁹ Dimitar Betchev, *Can EU Enlargement Work?*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 20 June 2024. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/06/can-eu-enlargement-work?lang=en>.