



BiEPAG

ESCAPING THE TRANSACTIONAL TRAP: THE WAY FORWARD FOR EU ENLARGEMENT

This year's BiEPAG public opinion poll suggests that citizens in the Western Balkan countries begin looking at the promise of a European future through pragmatic lenses. The EU's transformative leverage cannot work if the Balkan publics aspire to a mere transactional, economically focused relationship with the Union. To inspire and engage the region with a shared vision of Europe, the EU should focus on restoring the credibility of the enlargement process and communicating more candidly about the effectiveness and state of the policy.

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The changing nature of the EU ...

The latest 2021 European Commission Communication on Enlargement recognises that “a credible enlargement policy [built on strict but fair conditionality] is a geostrategic investment in peace, stability and economic growth in the whole of Europe.” In principle, the European integration of the Western Balkans based on a rigorous accession process is a win-win project: it is both the best anchor for the economic and democratic transformation of the countries in the region and instrumental for the EU’s own strategic autonomy and global foreign policy ambitions. Yet, at present, this bold narrative is more aspirational than realistic.

The past decade of ‘polycrisis’² has dampened the EU’s attractiveness. The limited ability of the Union to respond effectively to the recent economic, financial and ‘migration’ crises, to the various challenges to democracy in its member states and now to the Covid-19 pandemic has undermined its appeal as a strong and united group of countries working together to further economic prosperity and political stability.

Confronted with so many, complex, internal and external shocks, the Union has become more inward-looking and less concerned with its expansion towards the Balkans. If anything, enlargement has started to lend itself more easily to politicisation in the national arena of some member states, where mainstream or marginal parties with populist, Eurosceptic and anti-immigration tendencies can harness social discontent in a crisis-ridden climate to strengthen European citizens’ uneasiness about the potential consequences of further EU widening.

Grand political statements of support are still made, for example, at Western Balkans Summits, even if member states often struggle to get behind such declarations, no matter how vague they might be.⁴ However, over the past decades, enlargement has clearly suffered setbacks on account of EU capitals interfering at key decision-making points to block or derail the process. These incursions tend to be motivated more by concerns linked to domestic politics in the member states rather than to progress in the Balkan countries according to Brussels-based institutions.⁵ The French and Dutch block on the opening of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia in 2019, the Bulgarian veto on North Macedonia’s start of negotiations with the EU since 2020, or the repeated failure of the member states to agree on granting visa liberalisation to Kosovo, despite Kosovo fulfilling the set criteria, are only some of the latest examples of how EU capitals increasingly diverge in functional terms from agreed standards and procedures. Meanwhile, for European citizens, the Union’s widening towards the Balkans is either a non-salient issue⁶ or tends to be regarded with scepticism.⁷

Ramifications for public opinion

Throughout the region, people continue to be in favour of their countries joining the European Union (80.4% on average), even though the region’s biggest sceptic – Serbia – seems to have hardened its stance since last year: 53.2% of respondents are now backing the EU membership goal, compared to 64.1% in 2020.

1 We thank other members of the BiEPAG for their comments.

2 European Commission “[2020 Communication on EU enlargement policy](#)”, COM(2020), pp 19.3 See Cvijic S., Christine Huebner, Jan Eichhorn and Luuk Molthof, “[It’s the EU, Not Western Balkan Enlargement: French public opinion on the EU membership of the Western Balkans](#)”, Open Society European Policy Institute & D Part, 1 February 2021.

3 Van Rompuy, Herman (2016), “[20 years of the European Policy Centre](#)”, Speech.

4 See, for example Emott, Robin, “EU no longer agrees on Balkan membership guarantee, diplomats say”, Reuters, 28 September 2021.

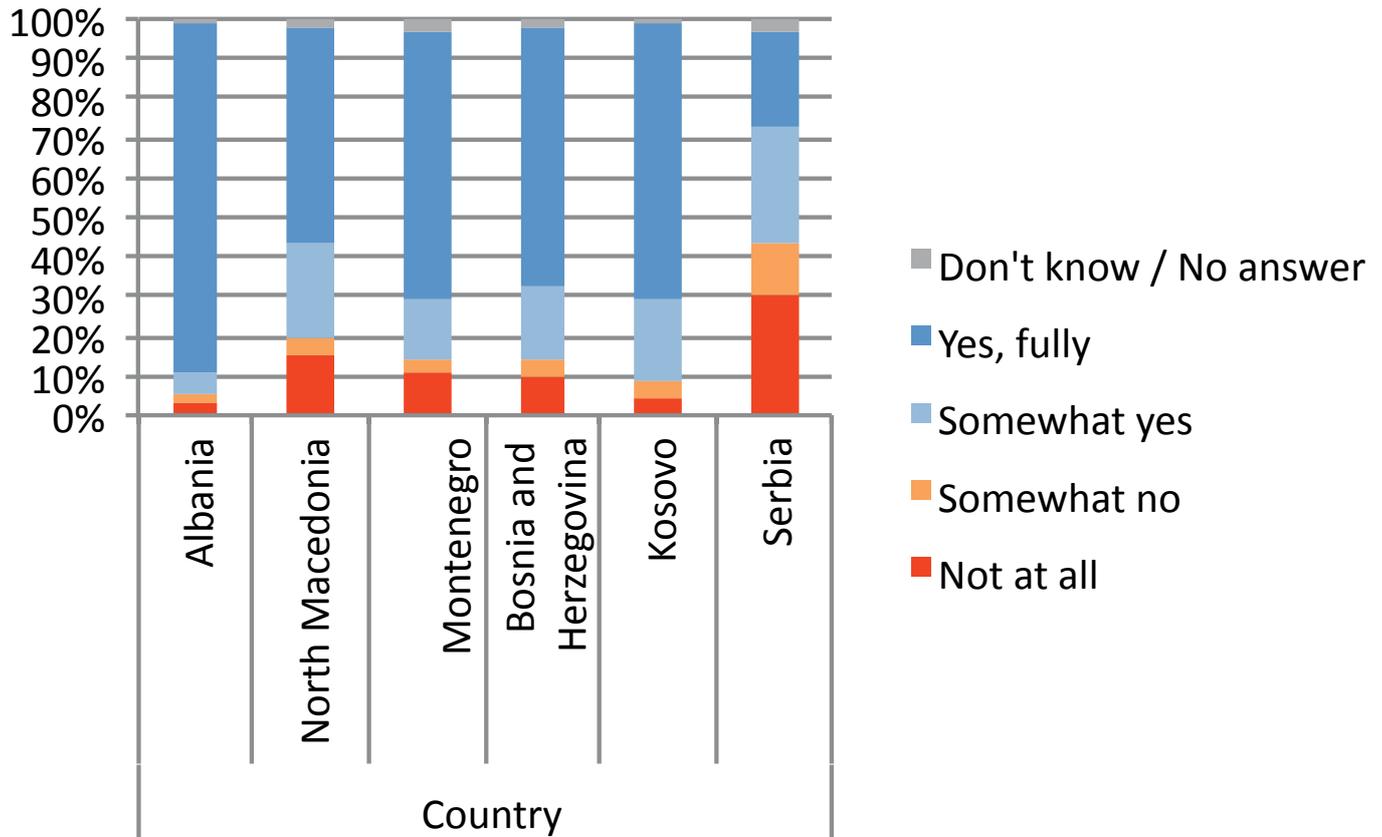
5 Balfour, Rosa and Stratulat, Corina (eds.) (2015), “EU member states and enlargement towards the Balkans”, EPC Issue Paper, Brussels: European Policy Centre. Djolai, Marika & Zoran Nechev (2018), “[Bilateral Disputes Conundrum: Accepting the Past and Finding Solutions for the Western Balkans](#)”; Dimitrov, Nikola, Djolai, Marika and Wunsch, Natasha (2015), “[Removing obstacles to EU accession: Bilateral disputes in the Western Balkans](#)”, Policy Brief, Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group.

6 See Cvijic, Srdjan, Huebner, Christine, Eichhorn, Jan and Molthof, Luuk (2021), “[It’s the EU, Not Western Balkan Enlargement: French public opinion on the EU membership of the Western Balkans](#)”, Open Society European Policy Institute & D Part.

7 According to the latest [Eurobarometer](#), published in September 2021, less than half of the citizens polled across the EU27 (46%) are in favour of EU enlargement. Public opinion in the Netherlands (67%), Belgium (66%), Germany (57%), and France (56%) emerges most hostile to further EU expansion, compared to Lithuania (78%) and Hungary (71%) where popular views on the subject are most favourable.



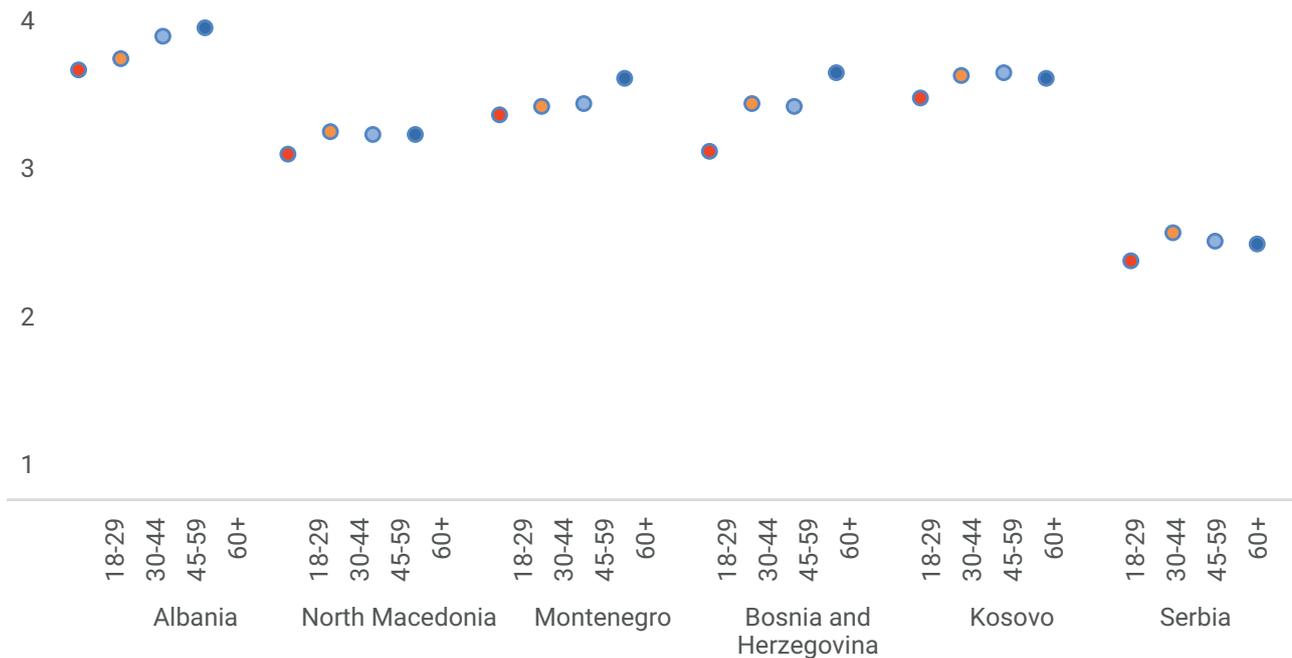
Table 1: Are you in favor of (COUNTRY) joining the EU?



A closer look at the breakdown of data by age groups also reveals that, young people (18-29 years old) in all Balkan countries are less in favour of EU membership than older cohorts (45 years old and above). However, this overall still high level of public support for the EU seems to reflect more what people wish for (that is, EU accession) rather than what they expect in practice. Across the Western Balkans, the percentage of those who believe that their country will never become an EU member is up to 23.9% from 20.8% in 2020. Here again,

the scores have worsened in Serbia and North Macedonia: the public in both countries is more pessimistic about accession in this year's poll (44.2% and 33.8% respectively) than a year ago (32.7% and 25.7% respectively). By adding to these results the percentage of those who think that it will take 20 years for their national aspiration of EU membership to be realised, it turns out that as much as 54.3% of respondents in Serbia and 46.7% in North Macedonia expect their countries to join the 'club' only after 2041, if at all.

Graph 1: Are you in favor of (COUNTRY) joining the EU?



Implications for political attitudes

The wavering of EU member states on enlargement also has consequences for the behaviour of local politicians in the region. In countries like Serbia, it has been exploited by political elites as a fig leaf to hide their own lack of commitment to reform, especially on the rule of law.⁸ By placing the blame for Serbia's slow progress on the EU's wavering attitude, the government in Belgrade has tried to divert public attention from its own transgressions in the accession process. The same strategy has already been used by Nikola Gruevski in North Macedonia, who instrumentalised the country's integration stalemate caused by the name dispute with Greece between 1991-2019 as an excuse to undo democratic reforms and abuse political power.

The rhetoric of some pro-European Balkan politicians also suggests that they are starting to give up on the EU as a credible partner. The Deputy Prime Minister of North Macedonia Nikola Dimitrov declared that "It has been two decades since we started the talks with the EU. We do not know whether to expect it anymore". In a similar way Albania's Prime Minister Edi Rama expressed fatigue with the way in which the member states

are handling the integration process for his country and North Macedonia: "We are hostages of EU nationalisms. The path of Western Balkan integration is dependent more and more on EU nationalisms."⁹

But other leaders in the region do not just stop at pointing the finger towards the EU when the member states break promises or act indecisively. Instead, they embark on forceful anti-EU campaigns, sometime on national television, to spread Euroscepticism among the population, while praising alternative partnerships, for example, with Russia or China.¹⁰ In recent years, media affiliated with the government in Serbia carried multiple false or unverified front-page stories to bash the West and commend the alleged support from Beijing and Moscow to the country.¹¹ This trend became particularly pronounced during the pandemic.¹² Even supposedly pro-European tabloids, such as *Blic* in Serbia, reinforce the image that the region is unwanted.¹³ Whether or not such tactics work, it is telling that public opinion in Serbia consistently emerges as the least favourable on EU enlargement in regional polls.

8 Tanjug, "Vučić: EU nas nikada neće prihvatiti kao punopravnu članicu", Nova S, May 2021.

9 Sinoruka, Fjori, "Albania's EU path held hostage by 'EU nationalisms', PM says", Balkan Insight, 15 July 2021. Beta, "Vučić o izveštaju EP: Ogoljene laži, izgubili su se u vremenu i prostoru", Danas, 26 March 2021.

10 Miteva, Svetla, "Populism and cosy ties with Russia and China: Vucic takes Serbia further away from EU", EurActiv, 20 April 2021.

11 "700 False news stories in Serbian tabloids in 2018", EUvsdisinfo, 18 January 2019.

12 From Mask to Vaccine Diplomacy: Geopolitical Competition in the Western Balkans, In: Giorgio Fruscione (ed), *The Pandemic in the Balkans: Geopolitics and Democracy at Stake*, IPSI, 5 April 2021.

13 "Evropska unija više neće zapadni Balkan," Blic, 30 September 2021.



...and of the enlargement process

Then again, it is not only that the EU has lost its appetite for expansion and some of its power of attraction in an ever more complex political and economic context. The enlargement process has also changed. On the basis of lessons learned during previous rounds of enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe, the EU has in time elaborated a more rigorous approach towards the Balkans, especially on the political dimension of the membership conditionality. Good governance criteria are now firmly anchored at the heart of the Union's 'to-do' list for the region. Moreover, a complex mosaic of benchmarks, safeguard clauses, more routine procedures to suspend negotiations, and the requirement for countries to demonstrate a solid track record of reforms ensures at present that the method for applying enhanced conditions is also more exacting.

The latest round of revisions to the enlargement methodology was adopted by the Commission in 2020, on the basis of French proposals, with the intention of making the process more credible, predictable, and political. The link between clusters of stringent conditions and tangible rewards for the Balkan countries is one of the interesting innovations brought about by the new methodology.

The new methodology could motivate the region to make steady progress by offering incentives to the Balkan countries. This approach would also be welcome in light of the difficult post-pandemic situation in the region¹⁴, for which the Balkans would need far more generous offers than the Economic and Investment Plan announced by the Commission last autumn.¹⁵ However, to fully grasp the merits of the new enlargement methodology, it would first have to be tried out in practice. This will only be possible when the member states unanimously endorse the negotiating frameworks for Albania and North Macedonia.

The various tweaks and fixes that the Commission has brought to its enlargement strategy since

2004 have tried to keep the process rolling and help the Balkan countries strengthen their democratic systems and develop their economies. Yet, until now, the results are underwhelming in terms of overall convergence between the region and the EU. Autocratic rulers, sobering economic prospects, widespread poverty and inequality, aging populations, and brain drain are some of the key aspects in which enlargement policy struggles to reap successes in the Balkans.

To be sure, regional and country-specific issues have also played a major role in testing the transformative power of the EU's agenda for the region. The Balkan countries had to undertake a triple transition: from war to peace, from a communist command economy to a liberal market economy, and from a single-party rule to a pluralist democracy. Resolving statehood issues by negotiating with neighbouring countries added then a fourth *volet* to the region's challenges. The EU and its member states had no ready-made solutions for such problems and the search for effective responses is still ongoing.

But the EU has also tripped itself in the region by letting off the hook authoritarian Balkan rulers who chip away at the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary, and the freedom of the media in their countries. By condoning authoritarian tendencies on account of political expediency or security guarantees, the EU has essentially allowed the deepening of state capture and democratic backsliding in the region.

The results of this year's poll suggest that citizens in the Western Balkan countries consider their national governments (32.5%) to be most responsible for their country's slow progress towards the EU. Citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina (51.1%) and Montenegro (43.1%) are most critical of their politicians' EU performance, followed by Albania (36.5%) and North Macedonia (32.4%).

14 The COVID-19 pandemic has plunged the Western Balkan countries into deep recession with severe job losses, especially among most vulnerable informal firms and workers, and a sharp worsening of their fiscal deficits and a rise in external debt. See World Bank 2021 "Subdued recovery" Western Balkans Regular Economic Report: Spring 2021 <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/eca/publication/western-balkans-regular-economic-report>

15 Nečev, Zoran, Majstorović, Srdjan, Emini, Donika and Vurmo, Gjergji (2021), "[Bouncing Back: Completing the EU Unification Process](#)", Policy Brief, Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group.

16 Richter, Solveig and Wunsch, Natasha (2020), "Money, power, glory: the linkages between EU conditionality and state capture in the Western Balkans", *Journal of European Public Policy*, 27:1, pp.: 41-62.

17 Spain, Slovakia, Cyprus, Romania, and Greece.



The perils of pragmatism

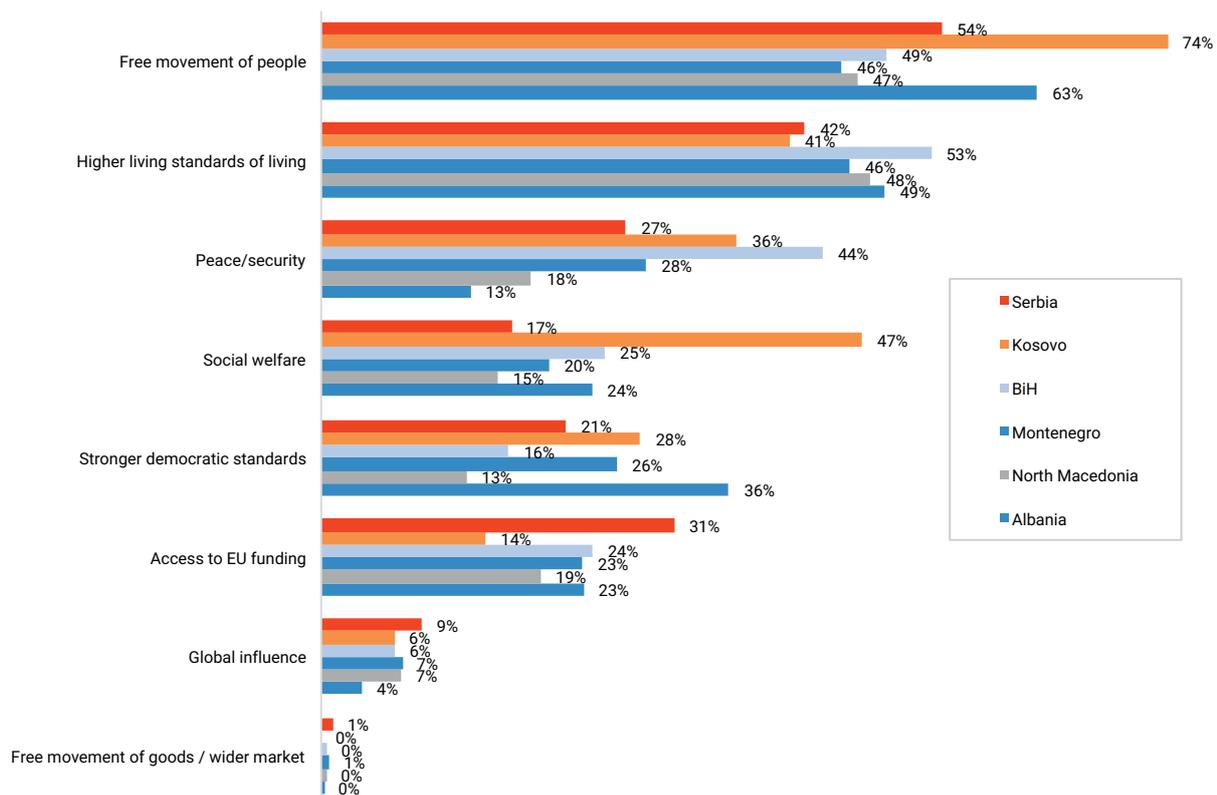
In contrast, given that five EU countries¹⁷ still do not recognise Kosovo and that the visa liberalisation issue remains unresolved, it comes perhaps as little surprise that Kosovars mostly take issue with EU institutions (39.6%) and “specific EU member states” (15.8%) and only then with their national government (13.4%). Similarly, the ongoing enmity between Serbia and Kosovo, and its relevance for Serbia’s ability to advance towards accession, could explain why Serbian citizens lay the blame first with EU institutions (23%) and then with their national leaders (18.6%), but also why they identify “other Western Balkan countries” (14.3%) and “specific EU member states” (12.4%) as obstructive.

Despite some cross-country differences, the fact that citizens in the Western Balkans find so much fault with their national governments’ performance in the European integration process should dissuade the EU from making any further allowances to law-defying politicians in the region and persuade the Union to instead ally with the people against such leaders. So far, the EU has not convincingly walked the critical talk about ‘state capture’ espoused in its recent strategic documents towards the region.

The EU’s haphazard commitment to enlargement, coupled with its rigorous conditionality that nevertheless has transformative limits and often bends to the vagaries of domestic politics in the member states, can lead to growing frustration with the integration process. As such, citizens begin to adjust their EU accession ambition to more pragmatic and achievable goals.

This year’s poll shows that citizens in the Western Balkan countries¹⁸ perceive economic development (57%) as far more important than membership in the EU (24%). Most notably, a relative majority of Serbian citizens (39.8%) see closer economic integration with the EU short of full membership as the preferred type of relationship with the Union. This finding echoes the kind of transactional view that Poland and Hungary had adopted towards their EU accession, and which now makes for complicated dynamics inside the Union. Moreover, across the region, advantages of EU membership are mostly understood in economic (rather than democratic/political) terms. Only 23% of citizens in the Western Balkans construe stronger democratic standards as a benefit, compared to 56% who identify the free movement of people and 47% who single out higher standard of living as the main advantages.

Table 2: What are the main advantages that (COUNTRY) can derive from EU membership?



18 Kosovo (and partially Albania) stands out by putting relatively much more emphasis on Euro-Atlantic integrations (49% and 39% respectively).



These results could suggest that citizens in the Western Balkan countries are starting to move away from perceiving EU enlargement as transformative and beginning to see it instead as more of a transactional process. From this new perspective, the membership conditionality is neither truly conditional nor fully effective, and the two sides – that is, the EU and the Western Balkan region – struggle to see past their narrow, short-term interests into a shared vision of the future.

As enthusiasm for enlargement has been fizzling out in EU member states and most governments in the Western Balkans are also distinctly more reserved or less committed, political declarations about the historic effort to reunite ‘Europe’ by integrating the region become less credible and less inspiring. Coping strategies based on a more transactional approach – for example, membership in the European Economic Area – could try to compensate for the lack of mutual, meaningful engagement. However, such alternatives play in the hands of those regional leaders who are only interested in economic benefits or look towards third countries, and are as good as sticking plaster solutions onto structural problems: they will never get to the bottom of the enduring socio-economic regression, unresolved constitutional disputes, and democratic backsliding in the Western Balkans. They also only make for occasional – albeit unreliable – partnerships rather than for constructive and committed ‘club’ members.

Is transformation still possible?

So, what can be done to revive the transformative leverage of enlargement policy and persuade the citizens of the Western Balkans countries to believe in a joint European future that goes beyond a transactional relationship with the EU?

For one, **words matter**. The EU should work on developing a new, more credible post-crises narrative on enlargement for aspiring countries. Credibility requires clarity. This might necessitate re-thinking of how the EU approaches its neighbourhood more generally. At present, it is not easy to tell whether an EU-hopeful country is stuck because it does not perform well or because it is held hostage by an EU member state or because it does not have a membership perspective at all. It may well be that enlargement to the Western Balkans is a strategic investment for the Union and the best anchor to support stability and development in the region. Still,

in light of the changes to both the EU and enlargement process, continuing to promote the benefits of EU membership using the same rhetoric from a time when the Union held a strong transformative promise and a more welcoming attitude for new members fails to convince, motivate and inspire potential new members. A more honest communication about the benefits of accession in light of the economic and political difficulties experienced by existing member states and about the real prospects for advancing and acceding to the Union would set a more engaging tone and lay more solid foundations to the EU-Western Balkans relation.

Yet words are not enough. Actions always speak louder. And there are at least four ways, listed below in no particular order, in which the EU and its member states could put their words into action:

- **First, by always keeping promises.** When pledged rewards are due, they have to be delivered. The start of accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania is long-overdue given these countries’ progress in line with EU’s demands. The same goes for Kosovo, which put in the work required but is yet to receive visa free travel. If the EU and its member states do not stick to their end of the bargain, they lose face and the process loses value. One way to move forward would be the introduction of qualified majority voting at least for all intermediary stages of the EU accession process. Since all German parties likely to form the new government in Berlin are in favour of Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) in the Council for foreign affairs and security matters¹⁹, this shift might finally be in sight. Western Balkan citizens would certainly expect such an initiative from Germany, which they see as the undisputed supporter of their cause in this year’s poll.
- **Second, by following-up good on criticism.** The critical language of the Commission’s reports, especially with regards to ‘state capture’ and infringements of the rule of law and media freedom, should reflect in the attitude of EU and member states officials vis-à-vis political leaders in the region who are responsible for perpetuating undemocratic practices. For example, the Commission could establish a protocol for how EU (and even national) officials should engage with the Western Balkan governments who have questionable democratic credentials. If the harsh rhetoric in Brussels is inconsistent with the friendly and complementary treatment

19 Russack, Sophia and Gros, Daniel (2021), “[An unpredictable German election... but a \(mostly\) predictable outcome for EU politics](#)”, CEPS updates.



offered by the EU and its capitals on the ground in the region, the message becomes an empty warning and confusing for the general public.

- **Third, by treating allies like partners.** If the European perspective of the Western Balkans is real, the EU should be generous towards these countries. Given the huge economic gap that separates the Union and the region, stretched even more by the ongoing pandemic, the EU should consider gradually opening the European Structural and Investment Funds and allow the region to participate in the Common Agricultural Policy. A full alignment of the Instrument for pre-accession assistance rules and procedures with the EU Structural Funds model should be considered, together with the integration of the Western Balkans countries into existing EU mechanisms such as the EU Justice Scoreboard, the new Rule of law Report and the European Semester framework.²⁰ The failure to invite the Balkans to participate in the Conference on the Future of Europe is precisely the kind of gesture that one does not reserve for partners.
- **Fourth, by showing the example.** The EU should live by the standards set to the region. Democratic backsliding in existing member states and the

EU's inability to effectively address such trends undermines its credibility and leverage as democratic promoter abroad. The efforts of the EU institutions to improve the quality of democracy in the Western Balkans through the accession process would be greatly reinforced if democratic reforms in the member states were discussed and addressed together with the EU-aspiring countries. Experienced organisations from within the Western Balkans, young people from the region who studied abroad or members of the diaspora would be ideal partners to target in this effort. The many years of strict democratic conditionality applied to the countries in the region have produced a wealth of knowledge and practical experience in terms of what does and does not help to sustain democracy. Working together to develop better solutions to common democratic challenges could result in joint strategies for current and future member states, including the identification of rule of law setbacks, coherent methods to focus beyond the judiciary to other issues of the rule of law and democracy, or setting up rule of law expert missions like the 2016 Priebe group for North Macedonia. And it might even help to produce an EU enforcement mechanism both for the accession and the post-accession period.

Methodology

The primary data used in this BiEPAG policy analysis come from a public opinion poll conducted in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, during July and August 2021. Survey was conducted on a nationally representative sample consisted of minimum 1000 respondents aged 18+, using mix mode: telephone and online interviews – CATI (Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing) and CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interviewing), while post-stratification was done by region, gender, age, type of settlement and education. Data collection was implemented by Ipsos Strategic Marketing.

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²⁰ Nečev et al. (2021), op. cit.





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