

Western Balkans
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CEPS EXPLAINER

A BATTLE AGAINST TIME - AND AGAINST PUTIN'S RUSSIA

What should be the next steps in the EU's enlargement agenda for the Western Balkans?



SUMMARY

With Putin's war against Ukraine about to enter its third year, the EU's enlargement policy remains at the top of its foreign policy priorities, with the focus being on both Ukraine and Moldova. This is following the European Council's decision to open accession negotiations with both countries.

But where does this leave the countries of the Western Balkans and their very long journey towards the EU which began over 20 years ago? Will these countries' hopes for much needed political momentum in their accession prospects be fulfilled during 2024, despite the repeated delays and the EU's failure to respect its commitments to the region over the past few years?

With elections taking place across Europe offering fertile ground for Russia to deploy its arsenal of disinformation tactics, time is not on the EU's side. To counter Russian attempts to influence developments in the region, as well as to reverse the dangerous trend of backsliding in democratic and rule of law reforms, the EU will need to adopt a more robust, consistent and determined approach towards the Western Balkans. Without any further delay, it needs to set out a much needed geopolitical and security direction for its enlargement policies in the Western Balkans.



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As the war rages on in Ukraine and will soon enter its third year, the shadow of Putin's Russia continues to loom large over the entire European continent. The ongoing conflict has also caused the EU to focus its enlargement policy on Ukraine and Moldova. As Russian aggression continues to pose a serious threat to the EU and its nearest neighbours, this focus on Ukraine and Moldova is likely to continue over the coming months, particularly following last December's European Council decision to open accession negotiations with both countries.

As Hungary's prime minister continues to try to sabotage the EU's support for Ukraine as it fights for its very survival, it's crucial that EU leaders work to ensure that support for enlargement does not stall.

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE WESTERN BALKANS?

Meanwhile, the countries of the Western Balkans are hoping that 2024 will herald some much-needed political momentum for their own accession processes and the EU will finally fulfil its much-repeated commitments to the region.

At its December meeting, the European Council reaffirmed its 'full and unequivocal commitment to the EU membership perspective of the Western Balkan countries' and called for the 'acceleration of the accession process'. It decided to open accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina, but only once the country has achieved the required level of compliance with the membership criteria. The European Commission is set to report to the Council on Bosnia's progress by March 2024.

However, the EU's enlargement record in the Western Balkans does not inspire much confidence. For years it has paid lip service to its commitment to the region without displaying much conviction. There have been repeated delays, unfulfilled promises and

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excessive use of the right to veto by some Member States to pursue domestic agendas that have nothing to do with the enlargement criteria.

Although Russia's invasion of Ukraine placed the EU's enlargement policy firmly back at the top of its foreign policy agenda, the EU's policy towards the Western Balkans has remained essentially unchanged. It has struggled to craft a more

determined political and geo-strategic narrative in response to the invasion's fallout and the subsequent increased fragility across the region.

Even with a negotiation process that, despite revisions, remains flawed, and has arguably not delivered the promised reforms in the Western Balkans region, the EU shows no sign of moving away from its typical bureaucratic recipes. It has either ignored or singularly failed to understand the deeply rooted divisions and ethnic tensions that prevail across a region still affected by the weight of history. By concentrating its efforts mainly on governments, it has failed to communicate effectively with wider society, especially with civil society organisations which play a vital role in countries that have weak institutions.

Instead of resolving the differences in the region, some of the solutions put forward by the EU and several Member States, such as France and Bulgaria, have added to the depth of mistrust across societies and between neighbouring countries. Consequently, they've undermined much needed reforms.

The Bulgarian veto on North Macedonia endorsed by the EU offers the worst example of EU double standards and further undermines the EU's credibility. Before the accession negotiations can start in earnest, the Macedonian constitution will have to be amended to formally recognise the existence of a Bulgarian minority in the country.

The way this was imposed on the Macedonian government without any reciprocity on Bulgaria's part is the main reason for the current lack of political consensus in North Macedonia for adopting the amendment. Bulgaria itself refuses to implement the multiple judgments made by the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg calling for the country to recognise a Macedonian minority in Bulgaria.

This dilemma facing Macedonian citizens has exacerbated inter-ethnic tensions as the country prepares for parliamentary and presidential elections scheduled to take place in April/May 2024, on top of delaying the country's EU accession prospects. It has impacted the government's reform record, where it has failed to significantly improve its performance on the rule of law and combat corruption (several high-profile politicians, including a former deputy prime minister from the 2017-20 coalition government, are currently on the US visa ban 'black' list).

If the accession negotiations for North Macedonia, which up to now have been pursued in tandem with Albania, suffer further delays, the pressure for the two countries to go it alone will increase. This will add further fuel to the ethnic divides within North Macedonia, with the ethnic Albanians becoming frustrated at the sight of their Albanian brethren across the border moving ahead towards the EU without them.

However, the Greek government may yet push back against any form of decoupling, due to its own unresolved bilateral disputes with Albania, the most recent one being the continued detention of a mayor-elect from the Greek minority in Albania for alleged vote buying.



BACKSLIDING ACROSS THE REGION

The increased backsliding in democratic and rule of law reforms across the region has been documented in the European Commission's country reports as well as regular reports from Human Rights Watch, Reporters without and the Freedom House Index. Fragility of the rule of law, increased corruption, the marginalisation of civil society, and the lack of proper checks and balances one expects in functioning democracies are all stark reminders of the regional situation, causing increased levels of emigration, particularly among the young who are seeking their fortune elsewhere.

This deteriorating reform record is prevalent even in those countries already in the middle of accession negotiations and shows how weak the EU's standing in the region is. A case in point is Serbia, a country that has been negotiating its EU accession since 2014. The recent parliamentary elections were judged by the International Election Observation Mission as suffering from 'significant polarisation' and 'strong influence of government on most media outlets'.

The authoritarian behavior of President Vucic, which the EU has tended to tolerate, is likely to increase as he consolidates his power with Putin's tacit support. Together with the Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia represents a convenient bridgehead for Putin to make his presence felt in the Western Balkans by sowing divisions and causing mischief across the region.

This is all the more reason why the EU should no longer accept, let alone tolerate, Vucic's refusal to align his government with the EU's common and foreign security policy, including restrictive measures and statements on Russia, despite repeated calls by the EU to do so.

Vucic also shows little inclination to work with Kosovo's government to fully implement the many bilateral agreements they've both signed up to (apart from a delayed recognition of Kosovar license plates from 1 January) and has even hardened his rhetoric against Kosovo. He knows he has Putin's full backing, who himself has been adept at using Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence, which Russia has refused to recognise, to justify his own actions in the eastern regions of Ukraine. Vucic is also aware of Russia's determination to veto any potential move on Kosovo in the UN Security Council.

The situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is equally alarming with existing tensions going even more into a downward spiral, with Freedom House pointing to the 'partisan gridlock among nationalist leaders from the country's Bosniak, Serb and Croat communities'. The European Commission's 2023 report refers to the repeated secessionist threats from the

leader of the Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, and the increased authoritarian measures he has introduced which 'are not in line with the EU path'.

A frequent visitor to Moscow, Dodik's behavior follows Putin's playbook for the region. His increasingly belligerent statements are exacerbating an already dysfunctional governance structure and if left unchecked constitute an existential threat to the country. This would have dire consequences for the wider region.

Croatia, due to Croats being one of the three constituent ethnic groups (around 15 % of Bosnia and Herzegovina's population) is following the situation closely. The Croatian prime minister, Andrej Plenkovic, even accompanied Ursula von der Leyen on her recent visit to Sarajevo. Mark Rutte, the caretaker Dutch prime minister, was also in tow.

While such visits are certainly helpful, it's nevertheless legitimate to ask why the EU and individual Member States are not devoting more diplomatic and political resources to address the current gridlock in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Almost 10 years have passed since the EU-endorsed 2014 UK/German initiative that aimed to revive the country's

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efforts to join the EU. In short, statements of concern might give the impression that the EU is doing something but they are utterly worthless if not backed up with effective action.

The only relatively bright spot on this rather bleak horizon is Montenegro, which has opened all its chapters in the EU accession process and it could conceivably become the 28th Member State. However, this would require a more stable government that's united in its objective of EU membership, something that is yet to materialise.

This already complex picture of the region would not be complete without referencing the many ongoing border disputes inherited from the region's troubled history. This 'weaponising of history' (of which Bulgaria's behaviour towards North Macedonia is but one example) to pursue a country's goals, utilised to brutal effect by Putin's Russia, will continue to cause serious problems for reconciliation in the Western Balkans. This is a fact that was recognised by the European Council during its December 2023 summit.



A MORE ROBUST EU RESPONSE IS NECESSARY

If this sorry chronicle of backsliding and Russia's ever-present shadow over the region tell the EU anything, it should be that pious words will simply not be enough. The EU will need to be much more proactive and determined in providing diplomatic political and economic incentives to help resolve these issues. Without them, the region will remain gridlocked and at loggerheads, as the Western Balkans countries will not be able to solve them alone.

Specifically, the EU will need to set up a proper dispute settlement procedure or mechanism, allowing for solutions that are not imposed by those with the biggest stick but based on mutual trust and respect for all parties concerned.

The EU will also need to be much more rigorous when assessing backsliding in the EU accession process. It should be ready to deploy more effective monitoring, and willing to impose political and financial sanctions for repeated failures to reform, particularly for those reforms related to the rule of law and the fight against corruption.

A YEAR OF ELECTIONS FRAUGHT WITH DANGERS

With this being a year of many elections, whether for the European Parliament or elsewhere in and around the EU, as well as possible changes in the leadership of the EU institutions, it will be a race against time to squeeze meaningful policy decisions out of the EU and its Member States regarding the Western Balkans. Unfortunately, this electoral environment and the uncertainty it brings offers fertile ground for Putin to muddy the waters and cause major disruptions through disinformation tactics and other nefarious activities that his regime is known for. His recent statements on the war in Ukraine reflect a renewed confidence that he sees the tide turning in his favour. And of course, the danger increases not only in the Western Balkans but across the whole of Europe if extreme right-wing parties perform well in the upcoming elections.

That's why there's no better time than the present, with no moment to lose. The EU cannot afford to falter or make mistakes over the coming months. After identifying the urgent and much needed geopolitical and security direction for its enlargement policies in the Western Balkans, the EU must not allow elections to distract it from delivering on its promises and commitments to the region. The people of the Western Balkans have waited long enough.

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