

## EU AND WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES

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### ABSTRACT

*The integration of the Western Balkan countries into the European Union is a key element of the EU's enlargement policy and a strategic priority for regional stability, economic development and democratic consolidation. Despite varying degrees of progress, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia continue to pursue EU membership as a path to institutional reform and socio-economic progress. While reaffirming its commitment to enlargement, the EU has linked eligibility for membership to comprehensive reforms in governance, the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary and the fight against corruption. However, the accession process has been slow and complex, influenced both by internal political dynamics within the candidate countries and by growing enlargement fatigue among EU member states. This paper examines the current state of EU-Western Balkans relations, the challenges and opportunities facing the accession process, and the geopolitical implications of further EU enlargement to the region. A successful enlargement would not only integrate the Western Balkans into the EU's political and economic framework but also strengthen the Union's strategic presence in Southeastern Europe in the face of increasing global competition.*

### KEY WORDS

EU  
Serbia  
Albania  
BiH  
Montenegro  
North Macedonia

## 1. Introduction

The EU has maintained a long-term commitment to the integration of the Western Balkans, seeing the region's stability and development as essential to the future of Europe. The countries of the region - Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro,

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North Macedonia and Serbia - have varying degrees of alignment with EU standards and progress in the negotiations, which are presented first in this paper. While they all share the goal of EU membership, political, institutional and historical challenges have made the process uneven.

This paper explores the EU's relationship with each of these countries, examining their individual paths towards membership, and the broader dynamics shaping EU enlargement in the Western Balkans.

We will start with Serbia, a country that is a key player in the region, having formally opened accession talks in 2014. However, its path remains uncertain due to concerns about democratic governance and its unresolved relationship with Kosovo. This paper will also focus on Bosnia and Herzegovina, which has been granted candidate status in 2022 and is struggling with internal political divisions and slow reform implementation. Albania has made notable progress, particularly in judicial and anti-corruption reforms, and has started formal negotiations. North Macedonia has been praised for significant reforms and regional cooperation, but bilateral disputes, particularly with Bulgaria, have delayed its accession. Finally, this paper also highlights Montenegro, considered the regional leader, which began negotiations in 2012 and has opened most chapters, although recent political instability has slowed progress. As Croatia is the only Western Balkan country that is part of the EU, this paper will also briefly discuss its position.

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## 2. European Union integration of the Western Balkans

The Western Balkans is a geopolitical term referring to the region of the following countries: Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Albania and Croatia. The countries of the Western Balkans have been candidates for European Union (hereinafter: the EU) membership for many years. There are many reasons why the EU is interested in this region. The first is that these countries have always been seen as a historical and geographical part of Europe.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, the political situation and conflicts in some of the countries, as well as mass emigration, caused the EU to start an initiative towards its stronger involvement in this region. For these reasons, the EU has included the Western Balkans in its enlargement plans.<sup>3</sup>

It is widely believed within the EU that European integration will not be complete without the full accession of the Western Balkan countries. However, the conditions of

2 | Many of those countries were formerly part of Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia was a country in South East Europe that was formed after the First World War, initially as the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. After World War II, it became a socialist federation comprising six republics: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia. Despite ethnic and religious differences, Yugoslavia maintained unity under the leadership of Josip Broz Tito.

However, after Tito's death in 1980, the federation was weakened by economic problems, rising nationalism and political instability. In the early 1990s, several republics declared independence, leading to violent conflicts and wars, particularly in Bosnia and Croatia. The dissolution of Yugoslavia resulted in the formation of several independent states, making it one of the most tragic and complex events in recent European history.

3 | Domachowska, 2021, p. 67.

the Stabilisation and Association Agreements (hereinafter: SAA), developed specifically for the Western Balkans, are stricter than those required for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. In addition to meeting the Copenhagen criteria, SAA signatories are required to cooperate with their regional neighbours. However, SAAs are not a guarantee of accession, although they can be an important step on the road to European integration.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, the strategic importance of this region cannot be ignored by the EU and its members. If we look at this region geographically, the Balkan countries represent a bridge and the shortest transit route between the south-eastern and central sections of the EU. The importance of this route was confirmed during the refugee crisis in 2015. Moreover, the economies of these countries already enjoy a close relationship with the EU. The EU is their biggest trading partner, their largest foreign investment source and the main destination for migration.<sup>5</sup> In addition, good economic and trade relations between the EU and the Western Balkans can contribute to improving the business environment, attracting foreign investment, and speeding up the membership process.<sup>6</sup>

The Stabilisation and Association Process (hereinafter: SAP) is seen as an instrument for negotiations between the EU and its future member states in the Balkans. It includes three objectives, such as the stabilisation of the region, regional cooperation and promotion, and accession to the EU. The SAP also includes SAAs, EU financial assistance and trade measures. The process requires political effort as well as financial and human resources.<sup>7</sup>

However, the main part of the SAP is when a state concludes an SAA with the EU. It sets out the rights and obligations for both parties contained in the SAA. The SAA is also of huge political importance, and leads to the creation of a free trade area, which is of crucial importance for the state party. It requires the state to harmonise its standards with those of the EU. When a country signs the SAA, it means that it has decided to become a member of the EU. The preamble to these agreements refers to the 'European perspective' - and explicitly to the potential for the country in question to obtain the status of candidate country for EU membership in the case of the successful implementation of the agreement.<sup>8</sup> However, before signing the SAA, there is a preparation period during which the state must meet EU standards and carry out reforms. These reforms are conducted in accordance with EU models and allow the EU to monitor the country's progress towards joining the EU's single market. The SAA, as an agreement, represents not only the bilateral relationship between the EU and the future member state, but also the development of cooperation and the promotion of good neighbourly relations.<sup>9</sup>

For each country wishing to join the EU, its negotiations with the EU are divided into 35 chapters. The candidate state must adapt its institutional, administrative and judicial capacities to EU standards. By closing these chapters, the candidate country acquires the conditions for full membership in terms of compliance with the requirements of the *acquis communautaire* and is considered to have completed the systemic reforms necessary for

4 | Babuna, 2014, p. 10.

5 | Dabrowski and Myachenkova, 2018, p. 1.

6 | Baranenko and Milivojević, 2011, p. 91.

7 | Schenker, 2008, p. 2.

8 | Gabrisch, 2023, p. 9.

9 | Nezirović et. al., 2022, pp. 37–38.

its successful function within the EU. The reforms required for full membership in the EU are among the highest in the world, especially in the areas of building an independent judiciary, environmental protection, strengthening the rule of law, human rights, building stable institutions, developing the civil sector, functioning of the market economy, protection of personal data, and so on. It is undeniable that all the reforms required by EU membership are necessary to build a modern, democratic, market-oriented state based on the rule of law.<sup>10</sup>

Although there are many benefits to being a part of the EU, there has been no enlargement since Croatia's accession in 2013. It does not currently appear that there will be any changes in that situation. In 2018, the then President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, stressed that 2025 could possibly be the year for new members, but not only for those who were the most advanced in the accession process at that time.<sup>11</sup> So far, however, no Western Balkan countries have joined the EU. On the other hand, each of these states has some kind of relationship with the EU, which will be presented in the following chapters.

Joining the European Union is a complex process involving several EU institutions, each of which plays a specific and important role. In this respect, the European Commission plays a central role in the accession process. It evaluates the membership applications from candidate countries and prepares an opinion on whether they meet the Copenhagen criteria. Once negotiations begin, the Commission monitors progress and produces annual reports evaluating reforms and alignments with EU standards. The Commission also proposes negotiation frameworks and chapters that will structure the accession talks.

The European Council, which is made up of the heads of state or governments of the member states, is responsible for providing the overall political direction of the enlargement process. The European Council must unanimously agree to grant candidate status to a country, as well as to open or close negotiation chapters. The European Council's conclusions establish the EU's key strategic priorities for enlargement policy.<sup>12</sup>

The Council of the EU plays a crucial role in managing and deciding on the course of accession negotiations. It adopts negotiating positions for each chapter and ensures that conditions are met before chapters can be provisionally closed. The Council also discusses progress reports and can suspend negotiations if necessary.<sup>13</sup>

The European Parliament is consulted throughout the accession process. It debates and adopts resolutions on the progress of candidate countries, and its consent is required by a majority vote before a country can officially join the EU. The Parliament plays a key role in maintaining democratic accountability and supporting the EU's values throughout the enlargement process.

10 | Stanković, 2014, p. 179.

11 | Gotev, 2018.

12 | Brennan, 2006, pp. 55–58.

13 | Costa, 2022, p. 46.

### 3. Serbia and the EU

The negotiations on the SAA between the EU and Serbia were launched on 10<sup>th</sup> October 2005, when Serbia and Montenegro were still a single state. The Republic of Serbia signed the SAA with the EU on 29<sup>th</sup> April 2008, which entered into force on 1<sup>st</sup> September 2013.<sup>14</sup> Serbia submitted its official application for membership in the European Union on 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2009 and obtained the status of a candidate country on 1<sup>st</sup> March 2012.

On 10<sup>th</sup> October 2012, the European Commission published two documents: 'Report of the European Commission on Serbia's progress'<sup>15</sup> and 'Strategy and main challenges of enlargement in 2012-2013'.<sup>16</sup> The main, and continuing recommendations of the report are appropriate reforms in the judiciary, the fight against corruption, the issue of privatisation of companies, the protection of the rights of vulnerable groups, as well as further constructive engagement in regional cooperation and the strengthening of relations with neighbouring countries. Out of a total of 33 chapters analysed and assessed by the European Commission in the report, the activities and results achieved were assessed positively in 26 chapters. The European Council's decision of 28<sup>th</sup> June 2013 to start to negotiate with Serbia marks the start of the most challenging phase of European integration, the negotiations on membership, where the country must fully align itself with the EU's institutions, values and legislation.<sup>17</sup>

Considering the chapters, Serbia has taken many steps in its system, only some of which will be listed here:

1. In accordance with the obligation arising from membership in the United Nations (hereinafter: the UN) and the signing of the Dayton and Paris Peace Agreements, Serbia arrested and handed over to The Hague Tribunal all 46 individuals accused of war crimes;
2. Serbia is a member of the most important universal international conventions (adopted within the UN system) in the field of human and minority rights protection, and a legal framework for the protection of rights has been established in Serbia in accordance with the standards of the Council of Europe, of which it has been a member since April 2003;
3. Serbia confirmed its commitment to regional cooperation by actively participating in the work of numerous regional initiatives and organisations. The conclusion of the CEFTA agreement in 2006, the Agreement establishing the Energy Community of South East Europe in 2005 and the Agreement on Common Aviation Area of Europe in 2006 contributed to cooperation between the signatories, but also to the advancement of the interests of each of them. Serbia has also improved bilateral relations in the region. Relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina have improved. In March 2010, the Serbian Parliament adopted

14 | Stabilisation and Association Agreement between the European Communities and their Member States of the one part, and the Republic of Serbia, of the other part, 18 October 2013, Official Journal L 278.

15 | European Commission, 2012b.

16 | European Commission, 2012a.

17 | European Council, 2013, p. 12.

- a declaration condemning the crimes in Srebrenica and calling for a decision by the International Criminal Court regarding Srebrenica;
4. Serbia has committed itself to the problem of corruption and has adopted a package of anti-corruption laws, such as the Law on Prevention on Corruption,<sup>18</sup> the Law on Financing Political Activities,<sup>19</sup> the Law on Seizure and Confiscation of the Proceeds from Crime,<sup>20</sup> and the Law on the Liability of Legal Entities for Criminal Offences.<sup>21</sup> The Anti-Corruption Agency was established and began operating on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2010;
  5. Serbia is also engaged in the reform of the judiciary and the independence of judges in the performance of their duties. In February 2022, the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia promulgated the Act on Amendments to the Constitution.<sup>22</sup> The amendments adopted were aimed at strengthening the independence of the judiciary, which is one of the key requirements of the EU in the accession process. These amendments abolished the three-year probationary period for judges and provided for the election of judges and court presidents by the High Judicial Council. In this way, the direct influence of the National Assembly on judicial functions and judicial decision-making during the probationary period was reduced. In addition, the guarantee of the independence of the judiciary has been strengthened by the permanent nature of the judiciary, the way in which judges are elected and their unremovability;
  6. A lot of new independent and regulatory bodies have been formed above all to the supervision of the behaviour of the executive power, such as Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, Anti-Corruption Agency, Ombudsman, Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection, Commission for Protection of Competition, etc. many are in new, better equipped premises, able to hire more professional staff.

Although Serbia is ready to accept as many recommendations as it should, one of the most serious obstacles to Serbia's accession on the EU side is the problem of Kosovo.<sup>23</sup> The EU has continued to put pressure on Serbia, insisting that it should work to establish 'good neighbourly relations with Kosovo' and that it should adjust its policy towards Kosovo and Metohija to recognise Kosovo's independence. Direct talks between Serbia and Kosovo began at the end of 2010, mediated by the EU. The Agreement on Integrated Border Management, which defines the borders between Serbia and its southern territories - Kosovo and Metohija - was adopted soon after the change in the Serbian government in the 2012 presidential elections, characterised by the election of Tomislav Nikolić as the President of Serbia. Shortly afterwards, in April 2013, Belgrade and Pristina adopted the first

18 | Law on Prevention on Corruption, Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No. 35/2019, 88/2019, 11/2021 – authentic interpretation, 94/2021 and 14/2022.

19 | Law on Financing Political Activities, Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No. 14/2022.

20 | Law on Seizure and Confiscation of the Proceeds from Crime, Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No. 32/2013, 94/2016 and 35/2019.

21 | Law on the Liability of Legal Entities for Criminal Offences, Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No. 97/2008.

22 | Act on Amendments to the Constitution, Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No. 16/2022.

23 | Economides and Ker-Lindsay, 2015, p. 1028.

agreement on principles for normalising relations.<sup>24</sup> It can be said that this agreement has no practical significance because Kosovo has not respected it.

In October 2024, the European Commission published the report on Serbia's position in the accession process.<sup>25</sup> It is said that reforms regarding the rule of law and relations between Serbia and Kosovo are still the most important part of the negotiations. There is an expectation from the EU for Serbian cooperation regarding the attack in the north of Kosovo in 2023, in that Serbia is expected to find the perpetrators of the attack. Despite this, Serbia and Kosovo are expected to continue to find solutions to all difficulties and to normalise their relations.

Serbia had provisionally closed 2 chapters. The Commission considers that Serbia should continue the process of implementing the SAA. Serbian legislation is still not in full compliance with the SAA in a number of areas, and it also needs to align its legislation, in accordance with Commission's recommendations. In addition, Serbia has introduced a number of temporary trade restrictions without providing sufficient justification or following the procedures laid down in the SAA. For example, when it comes to public procurement, the agreements concluded with third countries and the way these are implemented have failed to comply with the EU principles of equal treatment, transparency, non-discrimination and competition for the largest share of the value of public contracts. Consequently, this prevents EU companies from participating in the country's major infrastructure projects.

However, instead of democratisation as a primary goal, the process of normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Pristina has taken the centre stage in the accession process.<sup>26</sup> This fact had a negative impact on the dynamics of the accession process even before 2022, and the invasion of Ukraine has unfortunately further 'securitised' this area. Instead of being prioritised and valued in political discourse and also in practice, achievements in the field of rule of law and fundamental rights are not as prominent and valued as activities in the framework of high-level political challenges.<sup>27</sup>

The priority of harmonisation with the EU's initiatives against Russia is reflected in Serbia's accession process in two ways: both through the normalisation of relations with Pristina and through monitoring the state of relations with Moscow. This is an unfavourable position, but it is a fact that must be considered if the intention is to eventually become a member of the EU. The treatment of Russia has also created a sense of urgency and made enlargement policy one of the most important instruments for improving European security. These exceptional geostrategic circumstances have influenced the sudden advancement of less advanced candidates, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, whose democratisation process has not shown any positive trends for years. Moreover, several candidates, whose democratic performance is also not at an enviable level, have received a roadmap for the opening of accession negotiations under the accelerated procedure. As regards Serbia's progress in the accession negotiations, while two thirds of the negotiation chapters are open, the situation in most of the accession negotiations is broadly at the same level as in previous years.

24 | Bazić, 2019, p. 313.

25 | European Commission, 2024c.

26 | Petrovic, 2019, p. 38.

27 | Petrovic et. al., 2023, p. 351.

## 4. Bosnia and Herzegovina and the EU

The relationship between Bosnia and Herzegovina (hereinafter: BiH) and the EU can be observed in the post-Dayton period. The Dayton Peace Agreement also established the Constitution of BiH.<sup>28</sup> This constitution established a constitutional, political and territorial structure with two entities and institutions of BiH: The Parliament, the Presidency, the Council of Ministers, the Constitutional Court and the Central Bank.<sup>29</sup> This constitution also established democracy, the rule of law and the protection of human rights.<sup>30</sup>

As far as the process of institutional cooperation and in particular the accession process is concerned, the Thessaloniki European Council in 2003 is certainly important. Negotiations for the signature of the SAA started in 2005. The EU required the establishment of certain central police authorities, which had been largely separate in the two entities since Dayton. Following the adoption of the police reform in April 2008,<sup>31</sup> the SAA with BiH was signed two months later in Luxembourg.<sup>32</sup> Its application was soon stopped because BiH's did not fulfil a number of obligations, in particular those relating to human rights and the rule of law. The failure to implement the European Court of Human Rights' judgment in the significant *Sejdić Finci* case<sup>33</sup> was one of the examples of failure.<sup>34</sup>

In its 2004 report on the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the European Commission noted that some progress had been made in certain areas, but that the conflict between the central state and the two entities, and the lack of sustainable policies regarding the investor climate and the legal framework were proving to be problematic.<sup>35</sup> That is why BiH needs to solve the problem regarding its two dysfunction entities.<sup>36</sup>

For BiH, the EU integration process is primarily of geopolitical significance. By becoming a member of the EU, BiH will achieve internal integration and stability in its economic development. In addition, BiH would build the essential features of a rule-of-law state that protects universal human rights and its state integrity and sovereignty. In this context, the historic project of BiH's integration into the EU represents a strategic advantage for the citizens of BiH, because it enables the establishment of a stable and lasting peace.<sup>37</sup>

Moreover, the EU's relationship with BiH and its future as a member of the EU have been confirmed by the EU institutions, which have invested more than 3.5 billion euros into the reconstruction and development of BiH from 1996 to 2018. This financial support from the EU has made it possible to rebuild post-war infrastructure, reform public

28 | Osland, 2004, p. 548.

29 | Pejanovic, 2023, p. 24.

30 | Szewczyk, 2010, p. 24.

31 | Kim, 2008, p. 4.

32 | Stabilisation and Association Agreement between the European Communities and their Member States, of the one part, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, of the other part, 30 June 2015, Official Journal L 164.

33 | *Sejdic and Finci v. Bosnia and Herzegovina*, European Court of Human Rights, App. Nos. 27996/06 and 34836/06, Judgment of 22 December 2009.

34 | Halilovic, 2024, p. 150.

35 | European Commission, 2004, p. 375.

36 | Toal and Maksic, 2011, p. 290.

37 | Pejanovic, 2021, p. 198.

administration and establish the rule of law. There is hardly a region in BiH where the EU has not financed the reconstruction of municipal infrastructure, the reconstruction of educational institutions, the reconstruction of health care facilities and the development of small and medium-sized enterprises.<sup>38</sup>

In practice, several years passed before the last EU member ratified the signed SAA with BiH. In 2010, BiH citizens gained the right to travel to the Schengen area. At the end of June 2012, the EU organised the first meeting with BiH to prepare an official application for membership. Following the entry into force of the SAA in June 2015, BiH submitted a formal application for membership in early 2016. Subsequently, in December 2016, the EU presented BiH with the so-called Membership Questionnaire, a series of measures to be taken in various areas of governance and social organisation. At the end of February 2018, BiH submitted its answers to the questionnaire. In mid-2018, the EU submitted an additional 655 questions from the questionnaire, and the BiH submitted the answers to these questions on 5 March 2019. The European Commission published a positive opinion on the answers to the additional questions in May 2019.<sup>39</sup> However, it was not until 2024 that the EU opened negotiations with Bosnia on its accession to the EU.<sup>40</sup>

Given that the EU did not open negotiations with BiH until 2024, BiH has now committed itself to adopting legislation in line with the EU's recommendations. Thus, on 30 January 2025, BiH adopted as a matter of urgency the draft Law on Border Control, which is one of the two laws that the European Commission insists on being passed, in order to convene an Intergovernmental Conference to adopt the negotiating framework necessary to formally open the negotiation process with BiH. BiH has also adopted the Law on Personal Data Protection, which is in line with the EU General Data Protection Regulation. This law regulates the protection of natural persons regarding the processing of personal data for the purpose of investigation, detection and prosecution of criminal offences, in line with the decisions of the European Parliament and the European Council, while the Law on Border Control regulates all issues related to border surveillance. The European Commission has insisted on the adoption of these laws, considering them a prerequisite for the next step in the process of approaching EU membership. BiH has also adopted various mechanisms to create a coordination system for EU integration, such as working groups on European integration.<sup>41</sup>

On the other hand, the Law on Courts, one of the priorities for the opening of negotiations with the EU, was not adopted because there was no consensus for its adoption in February 2025. This law is one of BiH's priorities for opening negotiations with the EU and was drafted in accordance with the opinion of the Venice Commission. In its opinion on BiH's application for EU membership, the European Commission called for the adoption of a new Law on Courts, in order to achieve greater legal certainty and improve the functioning of the judiciary. In addition, on 21<sup>st</sup> November 2024, the Minister of Justice of BiH asked the Venice Commission for a follow-up opinion on the draft Law in the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council.<sup>42</sup>

38 | *Ibid.*, p. 205.

39 | Petrovic, 2021, p. 46.

40 | European Commission, n.d.d.

41 | Preljevic, 2024, pp. 112–113.

42 | European Commission for democracy through law, 2025.

However, BiH is still trying to find its place in the EU, whose political path is directed towards full EU membership, and this whole process and path seems to have no alternative, given the political crises the EU has faced in recent years. However, BiH has not achieved much on its way to the EU, both because of the politicisation of the integration process and because of systemic corruption and a lack of internal consensus on some issues. Furthermore, it also seems that the EU does not have a sincere political motivation to accept BiH as a full member. This raises the question of whether it is worthwhile for a country in the Western Balkans to pursue EU membership at all costs. At this point, we can conclude that the crisis of the EU's political concept is negatively affecting BiH's integration into the EU.

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## 5. Albania and the EU

Diplomatic relations between the EU and Albania were initiated in 1991 and strengthened the following year with the conclusion of a trade and cooperation agreement and a joint declaration on political dialogue. For the rest of the 1990s, the relationship was generally limited to donor-recipient status, as the EU became the country's largest supplier of external assistance. At that time, substantial trade preferences were also granted by the EU to Albania, which allowed for the facilitation of bilateral trade and the establishment of closer trade relations.<sup>43</sup>

As far as EU-Albania relations are concerned, Tirana started negotiations with the EU on the SAA in 2003. It represented the new generation of agreements that the EU envisaged for the five Western Balkan countries and was the first step on the road to EU membership. Albania signed its SAA in June 2006<sup>44</sup> and submitted its formal application for membership three years later, when it became a full member of NATO.<sup>45</sup> The EU also linked SAA negotiations to readmission negotiations in the case of Albania.<sup>46</sup>

It has continued reforms and stepped up its efforts in many areas, such as the freedom of the media, the speeding up of trials, the restitution and compensation for confiscated property, the protection of minorities and the strengthening public administration.<sup>47</sup> The Ministry of European Integration plays a central role in the coordination of 'European' affairs and is responsible for the planning and monitoring of all activities related to European integration, the harmonisation of the Albanian legal system with that of the EU, the coordination of EU pre-accession funds. Furthermore, it is the central point of communication with the European Commission. Albanian state institutions still depend on European financial and technical assistance, and all their activities related to the EU accession process are carried out within the framework of the National Plan for European Integration (2014-2020) adopted by the Council of Ministers.<sup>48</sup>

43 | Zahariadis, 2007, p. 13.

44 | Stabilisation and Association Agreement between the European Communities and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Albania, of the other part - Protocols - Declarations, 28 April 2009, Official Journal L 107.

45 | Abazi, 2008, p. 246.

46 | Dedja, 2012, p. 100.

47 | Hoffmann, 2005, pp. 67-68.

48 | European Commission, 2020.

The reforms that have followed most recently are largely the result of fulfilling the obligations of the SAA. In this phase, the EU has largely displaced other international actors and become the major and most important initiator of administrative reforms in Albania, as well as an evaluator of what has been achieved, implementing a policy of linking progress in negotiations to the achievement of reform objectives.<sup>49</sup> The most important recent strategic document is the Intersectoral Strategy of Public Administration Reform, adopted by the Council of Ministers in 2008, but also in 2020.<sup>50</sup> The strategies focused on the reform of civil service legislation.

Albania formally applied for EU membership on 24<sup>th</sup> April 2009. At the end of the same year, the European Council approved Albania's application and invited the European Commission to submit its opinion. The conclusion was that Albania still needed to achieve a necessary level of compliance with the criteria for EU membership before negotiations could be formally opened.<sup>51</sup>

In a short period of time, the Law on Civil Servants (2013), the Law on the Functioning and Organisation of the State Administration (2012), the Law on the Organisation and Functioning of Administrative Courts (2012), the Law on Public Procurement (2012), and the Law on Concessions and Public-Private Partnerships (2013) were all adopted.

In 2012, the European Commission instructed the European Council to approve candidate status for Albania, which was officially granted in 2014. It proposed to open negotiations with Albania in November 2016. On 26<sup>th</sup> June 2018, the General Affairs Council adopted conclusions on the EU-Western Balkans Stabilisation and Association Process, which includes Albania. The European Council endorsed these conclusions on 28<sup>th</sup> June 2018.<sup>52</sup>

In May 2019, the European Commission's report on Albania's progress<sup>53</sup> towards the EU was positive, as was the corresponding report on North Macedonia. Progress in judicial reform was praised, and one of the most important parts of the report referred to the Commission's view that Albania was ready for accession negotiations. However, it seems that some countries, such as France and the Netherlands, had not yet given a green light for negotiations to start.

The European Commission has stated that Albania's political objective is European integration, which is reflected in a number of factors. Albania has maintained its record of full alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. Regarding Russia's war against Ukraine, Albania fully aligned itself with the EU's position, including sanctions against Russia. In this example, Albania has shown, in the EU's view, that it is a reliable partner of the EU.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, Albania has started reforms on digital, human rights and rule of law, human capital, as well as energy and green transformations. Albania is seen as an 'instructive' country that has undergone far-reaching judicial reforms under the auspices of the EU. It is also fully aligned in terms of regional relations.<sup>55</sup>

49 | Dhamo and Dhamo, 2024, p. 199.

50 | Departmenti Administrates Publike, 2020.

51 | Yazgan, 2023, p. 294.

52 | European Commission, n.d.a.

53 | European Commission, 2019.

54 | European Commission, 2024a.

55 | Beshku and Mullisi, 2018, p. 49.

Some argue that Albania is more in line with EU policies than other Western Balkan countries. Moreover, Albania does not have many foreign policy problems with other countries, such as North Macedonia. However Albania does have internal problems, such as corruption.<sup>56</sup> The success of its journey will depend on continued reform efforts on the Albanian side and the political dynamics within the EU.

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## 6. North Macedonia and the EU

North Macedonia was the first of the Western Balkan countries to begin negotiations on the SAA and the first to conclude and sign this agreement in April 2001.<sup>57</sup> The SAA entered into force in April 2004, following ratification by all EU states. In March 2004, North Macedonia submitted an application for EU membership, following the example of Croatia, which did not wait for the entry into force of the SAA. After completing and submitting the EU questionnaire in February 2005, North Macedonia was given the status of candidate country at the European Council in December 2005.<sup>58</sup>

The main objectives of the SAA are to:

1. support North Macedonia's efforts in strengthening democracy and the rule of law;
2. contribute to the political, economic and institutional stability of North Macedonia and the stabilisation of the region;
3. provide a suitable framework for political dialogue that enables the development of close political relations between the EU and North Macedonia;
4. support North Macedonia's efforts in the development of its economic and international cooperation, among other things, by bringing its legislation closer to the EU legislation;
5. support North Macedonia's efforts to complete the transition to a functioning market economy;
6. promote harmonious economic relations and gradually develop the area of free trade between the EU and North Macedonia;
7. develop regional cooperation in all areas covered by the agreement in question.<sup>59</sup>

The SAA for North Macedonia is similar to those of other Western Balkan countries. It has ten key chapters that refer to everything that North Macedonia must respect, promote, work on, cooperate with, and fight against on its European path. North Macedonia's accession process began thirteen years after it declared its independence in 2004, although this process has made little progress in recent years. In December 2005, Macedonia was officially granted candidate status.

56 | Grieger, 2018, p. 4.

57 | Shabani, 2024, p. 309.

58 | European Commission, n.d.c.

59 | Stabilisation and Association Agreement between the European Communities and their Member States, of the one part, and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, of the other part, 20 March 2004, Official Journal EU 084, Article 1.

Every year since 2009, the European Commission has proposed the opening of negotiations with Macedonia, but this has so far been unsuccessful because Greece has vetoed the decision every year.<sup>60</sup> In 2012, Bulgaria also vetoed the proposal. Macedonia has unresolved bilateral issues with Greece and Bulgaria, which make it impossible for Macedonia to follow its European path.<sup>61</sup> The similarity in the above example between Serbia and Kosovo can be found in the internal problems between North Macedonia and Greece.

In June 2018, the Prespa Agreement on the name change to North Macedonia was signed,<sup>62</sup> ending the decades-long name conflict with Greece. Macedonia's European integration has perhaps been most affected by the severe economic crisis in Greece. The expectation that the name change under the Prespa Agreement, despite its unpopularity, could be a turning point was largely fuelled by the international community, as some of the more prominent leaders of the EU had visited before the Agreement was signed. Macedonia has met the most important benchmarks set by the EU for the start of negotiations, and it was expected that the EU would decide on the start of the accession process. However, the enthusiasm caused by the solution of the long-term dispute was not justified by the fact that the start of negotiations on Macedonia's accession to the EU were delayed.<sup>63</sup>

In the European Commission's report from May 2019 on North Macedonia's progress towards the EU, North Macedonia was recommended as a country that was ready to start accession negotiations with the EU. They had resolved their name conflicts with Greece, fulfilled the necessary conditions, and received the best marks with Albania when compared to the previous report. It was expected that the EU would decide to start negotiations, based on the powerful commitments made by the EU leaders. Instead, French President Macron blocked the decision, stating that the EU should first review its enlargement policy while noting that Albania did not meet the criteria to start negotiations. Before the October 2019 summit, the EU's enlargement policy clearly stated that each candidate country would be judged on their merits. Responding to Macron's views the European Commission developed a new approach, which it called 'Enhancing the Accession Process – A credible EU Perspective for the Western Balkans', representing a new membership methodology. A new methodology was adopted on 25<sup>th</sup> March 2020 from the European Council. Finally, having adopted this methodology, a decision was taken to start negotiations between the EU and North Macedonia in March 2020. The decision specified that the negotiations would be launched at the first intergovernmental conference between the parties but did not specify a date for this. This conference was supposed to take place during 2020. Unfortunately, Bulgaria blocked this from being realised.<sup>64</sup>

Commenting on the importance of the new methodology, in March 2020, Olivér Várhelyi, Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, stated:

The European Union enlargement to the Western Balkans is a top priority for the Commission. We are working on three tracks: Firstly, today we propose concrete steps on how to enhance the accession process. While we are strengthening and improving the process, the goal remains accession and full EU membership. Secondly, and in parallel,

60 | Minovska, 2023, p. 617.

61 | Agon, 2020, p. 11.

62 | Kolakovic-Bojovic and Simonovski, 2023, p. 104.

63 | Minovska, 2023, p. 617.

64 | Mojsovska, 2021, pp. 565–566.

the Commission stands firmly by its recommendations to open accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania and will soon provide an update on the progress made by these two countries. Thirdly, in preparation of the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Zagreb in May, the Commission will come forward with an economic and investment development plan for the region.

The first intergovernmental conference on accession negotiations was held on July 19<sup>th</sup> 2022, after which North Macedonia kept on implementing the SAA and the joint bodies under the SAA met. According to the European Commission's report, North Macedonia has consistently demonstrated its strong political commitment to the strategic goal of integrating with the EU and its willingness to make progress in the membership negotiations. The Commission considers that key EU-related reforms should be undertaken. North Macedonia should continue to maintain good relations with other Western Balkan countries and engage itself in regional activities. All bilateral agreements with neighbours should be implemented in good faith, including the Prespa Agreement. With regards to the Common Foreign and Security Policy, North Macedonia has fully aligned its policies, including on Russia's aggression against Ukraine, sending a powerful signal of its strategic decision to join the EU and demonstrating once again that it is a reliable partner.<sup>65</sup>

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## 7. Montenegro and the EU

Montenegro's independence was approved in a referendum on May 21<sup>st</sup> 2006, and bilateral recognition by EU member states soon followed. The European Commission has published European reports on Montenegro's progress since 2007, the year in which the SAA was signed.<sup>66</sup> On December 15<sup>th</sup> 2008, the country applied for EU membership. Its SAA entered into force on 1<sup>st</sup> May 2010.<sup>67</sup>

In order to obtain the status of a candidate country, Montenegro, like other candidate countries, had to receive a recommendation from the Commission on its readiness for the next stage of integration. Thus, based on the quality of the submitted answers and other relevant sources, the European Commission prepared an opinion on the readiness of the country for candidate status. In 2009, citizens of Montenegro were able to travel without visas to all 25 member states of the Schengen area, and in the same year the country received a questionnaire from the European Commission containing questions from all areas of the EU *acquis*.<sup>68</sup>

In the final opinion, Montenegro was given seven political criteria to fulfil, with the ultimate goal being the opening of negotiations for membership of the Union. These seven criteria are the:

65 | European Commission, 2024d, p. 3.

66 | Stabilisation and Association Agreement between the European Communities and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Montenegro, of the other part, 29 April 2010, Official Journal L 108.

67 | European Commission, n.d.b.

68 | European Commission, 2010, p. 4.

1. Improvement of the electoral legislation and the strengthening of the legislative and oversight role of the Assembly;
2. Essential steps in the reform of the state administration, with a focus on improving the professionalism and depoliticisation of the state administration, and strengthening the transparent and merit-based approach to appointments and promotions.
3. Strengthening the rule of law through key segments of judicial reform; improving the anti-corruption legal framework, while strengthening institutions and establishing a clear and stable mechanism for monitoring the results of investigations, prosecutions and final court judgments at all levels;
4. Strengthening the fight against organised crime, based on threat assessment, proactive investigations, enhanced cooperation with regional and EU partners, efficient processing of criminal intelligence data, and increasing law enforcement and coordination capacity. The development of a clear and stable mechanism for monitoring results in this area;
5. Improvement of media freedoms, in particular by harmonising its processes with the practice of the European Court of Human Rights on defamation, and strengthening cooperation with civil society organizations;
6. Implementation of anti-discrimination legislation and policies in line with European and international standards, ensuring the legal status of displaced persons and respecting their rights.<sup>69</sup>

In December 2010 Montenegro became a candidate country for membership of the European Union, and the accession negotiations began on June 29<sup>th</sup> 2012 with the first session of the International Conference. At the same conference, the so-called negotiating platforms, i.e. the general negotiating positions of the EU and Montenegro, were exchanged.<sup>70</sup>

The EU common negotiating framework consisted of the following 'essential elements': the policy of conditionality and border disputes, the policy of conditionality in relation to the SAA and the position of the European Commission, the euro (Montenegro already uses the euro as legal tender), the suspension clause (in the event of serious violations of the values on which the Union is based, the European Commission has the right to suspend negotiations on its own initiative or at the request of one of the Member States and to propose other conditions for the possible continuation of the negotiations), the balance clause (the Commission has the right, on its own initiative or at the request of a third Member State, to propose to 'freeze' the recommendation to open or close certain negotiation chapters and to take certain measures until the balance is restored).<sup>71</sup>

So far, Montenegro has opened 33 out of a total of 33 negotiating chapters with the EU. Due to intensive work, three chapters have been temporarily closed.<sup>72</sup>

While Croatia has, for example, been negotiating for five years and nine months, in the case of Montenegro it is still uncertain how long it will take to complete the negotiations and become a full member of the EU, but it is certain that the Union's doors are already open to it.

69 | Djurovic, 2017, p. 77.

70 | Schiop, 2021, p. 73.

71 | Djurovic, 2016, pp. 86–87.

72 | Nič et. al., 2024, p. 1.

In the report of the European Commission on Montenegro's progress towards the EU from May 2019, Montenegro received a warning and poor results in the area of media freedoms, as well as in the fight against corruption and organised crime. The question of further improvement of the rule of law and many other issues that still separate the population from the EU quality of life have rightly been raised.<sup>73</sup>

According to the European Commission's report from 2024, Montenegro's implementation of the SAA is still at a high level and meetings under the SAA have been regular. Montenegro's overall compliance with the interim benchmarks for chapters 23 and 24 was confirmed at the 16<sup>th</sup> Accession Conference with Montenegro on June 26<sup>th</sup> 2002, and the benchmarks for the closure of these chapters were adopted. This fact opened a new stage in membership negotiations, with the potential for further chapters to be provisionally closed. In doing so, it will be necessary for Montenegro to build a track record of implementing and delivering results on the ground. European integration, as a political goal of Montenegro and its politicians, is seen as the main priority for Montenegro and maintaining the EU's strategic orientation remains of crucial importance. Since it came to power in October 2023, the Government has operated in a generally stable political environment, which has become less polarised compared to recent years. However, the country and its institutions are weak and vulnerable to political crises. The Parliament elected in June 2023 held its first session at the end of October 2023 and has generally met regularly, largely reaching consensus on key EU-related reforms.<sup>74</sup>

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## 8. Croatia

Croatia became a member of the European Union on July 1<sup>st</sup> 2013, ahead of other Western Balkan countries, due to a combination of political, institutional, and strategic factors. Following the end of the war in the 1990s, Croatia achieved faster political and economic stabilisation compared to its neighbours, enabling it to initiate comprehensive reforms early on. The country demonstrated a strong commitment to aligning with EU standards by building effective administrative structures and adopting the EU *acquis* across various sectors. Importantly, Croatia met a critical EU condition by fully cooperating with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, including the extradition of indicted war criminals, which helped overcome political resistance within the EU. Furthermore, EU integration has enjoyed widespread public and political support in Croatia, ensuring consistent progress despite changes in government. Relative political and ethnic stability also created a more favourable environment for reforms. Lastly, Croatia's accession was seen by the EU as a strategic move to promote stability and regional cooperation in the Western Balkans, positioning Croatia as a role model for neighbouring countries still on the path to membership.<sup>75</sup>

73 | European Commission, 2019b.

74 | European Commission, 2024b.

75 | Maldini and Paukovic, 2015, pp. 178–180.

## 9. Conclusion

The EU's enlargement policy towards the Western Balkans faces both political and practical challenges, yet the prospect of EU membership remains a powerful catalyst for reforms in the region. For these countries, EU accession is not only a matter of economic and political transformation but also a pathway towards long-term peace, stability, and prosperity. While the timeline for full integration remains uncertain, the process is gradually moving forward, with each country continuing to take important steps toward meeting EU criteria.

As the region navigates these complexities, continued EU support, alongside political will from the Western Balkans, will be essential to securing a unified and stable European continent. The Western Balkans' future in the EU will largely depend on the resolution of internal and regional conflicts, sustained reform efforts, and the capacity of both EU institutions and the individual nations to overcome the obstacles that have historically hindered progress.

Looking beyond just the technical and political dimensions, the future of the Western Balkans within the EU is also about fostering a sense of shared identity and purpose. The EU's commitment to regional integration offers the potential for deeper cultural and societal cooperation, which can help bridge longstanding ethnic and political divides. For the people of the Western Balkans, joining the EU holds the promise of greater economic opportunities, enhanced security, and stronger democratic institutions.

However, the process will not be without its setbacks. The EU itself is undergoing significant transformation, and internal challenges such as enlargement fatigue and rising nationalism could potentially complicate the integration process. Still, the EU remains a key anchor for the region's stability, especially given the geopolitical context in which Russia, China, and Turkey have shown growing influence in the Western Balkans.

Therefore, the future of the Western Balkans in the EU depends on a dual commitment - both from the region to continue pursuing reforms, and from the EU to maintain its openness to further enlargement. The road to full membership is long and fraught with challenges, but it offers the promise of a more stable, integrated Europe that reflects the diversity and complexity of the continent as a whole. Ultimately, successful integration of the Western Balkans would not only benefit the region itself but also contribute to the overall strength and cohesion of the EU, making it a truly inclusive and united entity.

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