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EU TWINNING FACTSHEETS / NEWS ON THE EU INTEGRATION PROCESS

WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES IN THE EU INTEGRATION PROCESS

► SHORT HISTORY OF PREVIOUS ENLARGEMENTS

The European Union was set up with the aim of ending wars and creating peace in Europe. The European Coal and Steel Community was created in 1951 by six founding states: Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxemburg and the Netherlands. The cooperation was expanded to other economic sectors: the European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Community were established in 1957. This cooperation evolved to the organization that we call European Union today. Ever since 1957, the European alliance has expanded continuously at varying rates. Article 49 of the Treaty on the European Union provides that “any European country may apply for membership if it respects the democratic values of the EU and is committed to promoting them.” Until now, there have been six waves of enlargement:

- Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom acceded to the EU in 1973 (first);
- Greece acceded in 1981 (second);
- Spain and Portugal acceded in 1986 (third);
- Austria, Finland and Sweden acceded in 1995 (fourth);
- the Czech Republic, Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia acceded in 2004 (fifth, first stage);
- Bulgaria and Romania became EU members in 2007 (fifth, second stage); and Croatia acceded in 2013 (sixth).

► CONDITIONS FOR ACCESSION

Each of the accession countries had and have to undertake to meet the requirements known as the Copenhagen Criteria, which were agreed by the Council of the European Union in Copenhagen in 1993. These include:

- political criteria: stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for / protection of minorities;
- economic criteria: a functioning market economy able to cope with competitive pressures and market forces within the EU; and
- the capacity to take on the obligations of EU membership, including adherence to the objectives of political, economic and monetary union.

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REPUBLIK ÖSTERREICH
Parlament



ORSZÁGGYŰLÉS



HRVATSKI SABOR

► THE WESTERN BALKANS REGION AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

There are six countries from the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo¹, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia) in the EU's current enlargement agenda. Of these six states:

- Montenegro and Serbia are candidate countries engaged in the negotiation process,
- Albania and North Macedonia are candidate countries waiting for negotiations to be opened,
- Bosnia and Herzegovina, along with Kosovo, are potential candidate countries (i.e. a country not recognized as a candidate country but with a perspective of being one).

In 1999, the EU launched the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP), a framework for relations between the EU and countries in the Western Balkans. Essentially, the SAP has served as the framework for EU negotiations with all countries of the Western Balkans, having three main aims: stabilising the countries and encouraging their swift transition to a market economy; promoting regional co-operation; preparing countries for EU membership.

In June 2000 in Feira, the European Council acknowledged that Western Balkan countries participating in the Stabilisation and Association Process are 'potential candidates' for EU membership. In February 2018 the European Commission reaffirmed the 'European perspective' of the Western Balkans countries in its 'Western Balkans Strategy'. It adopted the strategy for 'A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans', confirming the European future of the region as a geostrategic investment in a stable, strong and united Europe based on common values. It spells out the priorities and areas of joint reinforced cooperation, addressing the specific challenges the Western Balkans face, in particular the need for fundamental reforms and good neighbourly relations.

Each year the Commission adopts its "Enlargement Package" - a set of documents explaining its policy on EU enlargement. Most importantly, this package includes a Communication on enlargement which sets out the way forward and takes stock of the situation in the candidate countries and potential candidates. The package contains the Reports in which the Commission services present their detailed assessment of the state of play in each potential candidate and candidate country, what has been achieved over the last year, and set out guidelines on reform priorities.

It is important to emphasize that the Commission is initiating the decisions of the EU in enlargement policy, but the decisions are taken by the Member States either in the European Council (level of Heads of States or Governments) or in the Council (level of Ministers).

In October 2019, the European Council did not decide on opening the accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia but announced that it would revert to the issue of enlargement before the EU-Western Balkans summit to be held in Zagreb in May 2020.

The new European Commission stepped into office on 1 December 2019. The key players for enlargement policy are Ms Ursula Von der Leyen, a German politician who became the President of the European Commission, Mr Josep Borrell, a politician from Spain who fills in the post of Vice-President of the European Commission and High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and Mr Olivér Várhelyi, a Hungarian diplomat who got the post of the Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement.

¹ This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence

On 5 February 2020, the European Commission launched its Communication on “Enhancing the accession process - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans” aiming to reinvigorate the accession process by making it more predictable, more credible, more dynamic and subject to stronger political steering, based on objective criteria and rigorous positive and negative conditionality, and reversibility.

In March 2020, following the conclusions of the General Affairs Council of the European Union, the European Council endorsed this Communication, reiterating that it looks forward to the Commission’s proposals integrating the enhanced approach in future negotiating frameworks and building on applicable practice under the renewed consensus on enlargement. The European Council also decided to open accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia.

In May 2020, the EU-Western Balkans Zagreb Summit (held online) adopted a Declaration which reiterated the EU’s strong solidarity with the region, reaffirmed its European perspective and sent a message of enhanced engagement on the EU side.

In October 2020, together with the 2020 Enlargement Package, the Commission also adopted a comprehensive Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, which aims to spur the long-term economic recovery of the region, support a green and digital transition, foster regional integration and convergence with the European Union. It sets out a substantial investment package mobilising up to €9 billion of funding for the region, supporting sustainable connectivity, human capital, competitiveness and inclusive growth, and the twin green and digital transition.

The assessments of the Enlargement Package are accompanied by recommendations and guidance on the reform priorities, which remain at the heart of the EU accession process. The implementation of these reforms, in particular in the rule of law area, will be crucial for the success of the Economic and Investment Plan and fostering sustainable economic development in the region.

▶ **STATE OF PLAY OF THE EU INTEGRATION PROCESS IN COUNTRIES OF THE WESTERN BALKANS** *(countries are listed according to the English alphabetical order)*

Albania

Albania applied for accession in 2009, and it was granted candidate status in 2014.

As a condition for opening accession negotiations, the Commission identified five key areas where Albania should deliver progress: administrative reform, judicial reform, fight against corruption, fight against organized crime, human rights (including the protection of minorities).

In its May 2019 Enlargement Package, the Commission recommended that Member States open negotiations with Albania. In October 2019, the European Council postponed the decision on this issue, but in its conclusions of March 2020, it gave green light to open accession negotiations with Albania.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia and Herzegovina is currently recognized by the EU as a potential candidate for EU membership. The country officially applied for EU membership in 2016.

In its Opinion on membership application of Bosnia and Herzegovina, published in May 2019, the Commission stated that the country was at an early stage in meeting the conditions for EU accession and therefore outlined comprehensive reform proposals in the areas of rule of law, democracy, fundamental rights and public administration.

The Commission considered that negotiations for accession to the European Union should be opened with Bosnia and Herzegovina once the country has achieved the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria and in particular the Copenhagen political criteria. Bosnia and Herzegovina will need to fundamentally improve its legislative and institutional framework to ensure it meets the 14 key priorities listed in the Opinion, among others

- to ensure a track record in the functioning at all levels of the coordination mechanism on EU matters, including by developing and adopting a country-wide programme for the adoption of the EU acquis;
- to ensure the proper functioning of the Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee as a joint body (delegation) of BiH and the European Union in parliamentary dimensions.

In December 2019 the Council adopted Conclusions on the Commission's Opinion where it urges BiH to start address the key priorities like the public administration reform, the judiciary reform, to strengthen the fight against corruption and organized crime, etc.

Kosovo

Kosovo became a potential candidate in 2008, whereas the Stabilization and Association Agreement entered into force in 2016.

All but five Member States (Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain) have recognised Kosovo's independence. In the region, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina have not recognised Kosovo.

The European Commission opened visa liberalization negotiations with Kosovo in 2012 and in July 2018 it proposed to the European Parliament and the Council lifting the visa requirement.

However, there has not yet been enough majority among Member States in favour of granting of a visa waiver for Kosovo.

Montenegro

Montenegro applied for EU membership in 2008, and then opened accession negotiations in 2012. In its Enlargement Strategy published in February 2018, the Commission outlined 2025 as a possible accession target for Montenegro, alongside Serbia.

Montenegro has so far opened a total of 32 accession chapters out of 35, and provisionally closed three.

North Macedonia

North Macedonia applied in 2004 for membership, and it was granted candidate status in 2005. The main obstacle to the start of accession negotiations was the name dispute with Greece, which was resolved by the June 2018 Prespa Agreement. In the light of the results achieved by Skopje, the Commission has repeatedly proposed to the Council, in its 2019 Enlargement Package to open the accession negotiations with North Macedonia.

After a lack of agreement in October 2019, the European Council made the decision to open accession negotiations with North Macedonia in March 2020.

Serbia

Serbia applied for accession in 2009, and opened accession negotiations in 2014. In its February 2018 Enlargement Strategy, the European Commission foresaw that Serbia would be ready to join in 2025, following the expected reforms.

To date, 18 of the accession negotiation chapters have been opened and two have been provisionally closed.