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New efforts for old challenges in the Western Balkans

On 6th of February the European Commission announced six flagship initiatives, specific actions that the EU will take over the next years to support the transformation efforts of the Western Balkans in areas of mutual interest. These range from initiatives to strengthen the rule of law, reinforced cooperation on security and migration through joint investigative teams and the European Border and Coast Guard, to expanding the EU Energy Union to the Western Balkans or lowering roaming charges and rolling out broadband in the region. The Strategy also underlines the need for the EU to be prepared to welcome new members once they have met the criteria. The EU is already the most important donor and investor in the region as well as political partner of the Western Balkans. Moreover it is Western Balkans' largest trading partner with an annual total trade volume of €43 billion (2016) [*Strategy for the Western Balkans: EU sets out new flagship initiatives and support for the reform-driven region*, European Commission Press release, 06/02/2018].

The flagship initiatives target specific areas of common interest: rule of law, security and migration, socio-economic development, transport and energy connectivity, digital agenda, reconciliation and good neighbourly relations. Concrete actions in these areas are foreseen between 2018 and 2020 for facilitating the incorporation of the acquis, so that countries could join the bloc in 2025 at the earliest [*Communication from the commission to the European parliament, the council, the european economic and social committee and the committee of the regions, A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans*, European Commission, 06/02/2018].

These efforts derive from the awareness that the European path has not yet solved important problems in these countries. In fact the appetite of the Western Balkans states to join the Union has decreased vis-à-vis a growing Russian and Chinese influence that could trigger ethnic struggles of the Balkan mosaic, jeopardising any EU or NATO membership prospect. Russian revanchism, already shown in Ukraine, could be a serious risk because it could help local corrupt politicians in destabilising relatively weak countries with a fragmented national framework, as Bosnia and Herzegovina or FYROM

These common problems of ethnicities and borders have so greatly slowed the inclusion of the Balkan countries in the Western structures, that the European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker has stated “there can be no further accession for Western Balkans countries without border disputes having first been resolved” [*EU Lays Out Accession Path For Balkan Countries*, RadioFreeEurope RadioLiberty, 06/02/2018].

If this new Strategy has to show a clear path for the Balkan countries, it has to be implemented as soon as possible, in order to overcome the perplexities and challenges within the region.

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