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BALKAN PERSPECTIVES 2020
The Fight for a Timely Inclusion

Policy Background Paper

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Almost thirty years have passed since the outbreak of the wars that ultimately led to the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the collapse of Albania's communist regime. While the NATO integration process in the Balkan region has constantly advanced throughout this period, securing Slovenia, Albania, Croatia and Montenegro's membership, the pace of the European enlargement has been slower. Only Slovenia and Croatia are members of the European Union. Ljubljana joined in 2004, Zagreb in 2013. Serbia and Montenegro have embarked accession talks, but many chapters are still open, and it is taking longer than predicted. Albania and North Macedonia are due to start accession talks, after the EU Council gave the green light in March 2020. Being optimistic, the process will last at least ten years. As for Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, they lag behind: EU accession talks are not on the horizon.

The Western Balkans are facing troubled times. The very fragile economic scenario is forcing a growing number of young talented people to leave, seeking better opportunities in Western Europe. This is devastating in terms of social-economic sustainability. Catching up with the rest of Europe becomes even more difficult.

Beside this, a concerning trend of democratic backsliding jeopardizes the future of the region. Respect for the rule of law, media pluralism, separation of powers and administrative decentralization are worsening throughout the region, especially in Serbia, Montenegro and Albania, as highlighted by independent research centres.

The migrant crisis is another potential disrupting factor. The Western Balkans do not have financial and technical resources to cope with the flow of people, mostly coming from the Middle East, who cross the region heading to Western Europe. This trend is exacerbating political disputes in Bosnia and Herzegovina, currently the bottleneck of the Balkan Route, and can further complicate the situation in the whole region.

Geopolitical projections try to carve the region, too, threatening that EU stabilizing role, once undisputed. Russia and Turkey are exerting influence mixing soft power, investments in infrastructures and energy, political pressure and hybrid means, a Moscow's special skill. China is emerging as a game-changer, turning the region into a relevant hub for the Belt and Road Initiative through massive infrastructural investments. Last, but not least, the USA are back, claiming a strong role in the Serbia-Kosovo talks (led by the EU in the last ten years), after years of low-profile. The US re-engagement is

a chance for the European perspective, yet Washington and Brussels must find a way to develop a balanced and coherent action. Competitive attitudes are hampering cooperation.

In sum, the Western Balkans are trapped in a limbo, that cannot last too long. It is primarily up to the EU, the first lender, the first trade partner, the first political partner for the Western Balkans, to end it. The 27-nations union must re-energize its strategy for the Western Balkans and act more resolutely as a democracy provider. Addressing more seriously issues like the rule of law, minority rights, transparency in the administrative field and fight against corruption is vital to improve the political scenario in the Western Balkans but also to develop a better economic environment, that would slow down the drain of young talents and reduce social inequalities.

The economic downturn caused by the Covid-19 pandemic could accelerate them. According to a recent World Bank study, more than 400.000 people could fall into poverty, while the shares of the middle and upper classes could shrink substantially, between 2 and 10% depending on the country and the length of the crisis.

The EU simply does not lead: it is against its nature. Soft power and dialogue are and will be the tools to reignite the European perspective in the Western Balkans, where people are still attached to the European perspective, but a new and clear political impetus is required. Differently from the Commission, that throughout the years has demonstrated its long-term commitment for the region despite facing very tough challenges (Eurozone crisis, Brexit and more recently the post-pandemic reconstruction), the member states' initiative for a timely inclusion of the Balkan Six has been unsteady. The enlargement fatigue came out after the EU historic expansion in 2004 is still a big rock on the road.

The new methodology for enlargement, devised under France's impulse, could clear the path. Previously based on a chapter-by-chapter approach, the mechanism focusses now on six clusters, and the first one, "Fundamentals, including rule of law", gives the enlargement process a much stronger political dimension, proving EU's concern for the ongoing democratic backsliding. Will it be effective? It is a two-sided story. Western Balkans leaders must show a genuine will to make reforms, so far extremely weak. On the other hand, the EU member states must support the Commission in developing the new strategy, showing that it is not just on paper.

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Matteo Tacconi (1978) is an Italian professional journalist. Since 2005, he has been covering the Balkans and Central Europe for a wide range of printed and online magazines. He reports for radio-tv networks, too, especially for the Swiss public broadcaster in Italian language (RSI).

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Over the years, he has taken part to several OSCE electoral observation missions in the Western Balkans and in the former USSR countries as a short term observer.

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