

THE WESTERN BALKANS AND PROSPECTS FOR THE EU AND NATO ACCESSION

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The Western Balkans region holds vital strategic importance for transatlantic security. Following the collapse of the Former Yugoslavia, the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have actively contributed to regional stability both in the form of peace missions and through offering the regional countries integration prospects with the transatlantic structures. Amidst years of enlargement fatigue, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has underlined the significance of the integration of the Western Balkans into the transatlantic institutions. This article examines the recent developments in the Western Balkans and analyzes the prospects for the Euro-Atlantic integration of the regional countries.

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The Western Balkans region holds vital strategic importance for transatlantic security. Stability in the region has direct implications for European and transatlantic security, stability, and peace. Following the collapse of Former Yugoslavia, the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have actively contributed to regional stability through peace missions in the region both during and in the aftermath of the civil wars. Since the 2000s, the EU and NATO offered membership prospects to the countries in the Western Balkans. The strategic importance of the region increased in the post-2014 era, against the background of foreign fighters joining the Islamic State terrorist organization (ISIS) from the Western Balkans, raising concerns in the transatlantic circles. Moreover, the region's location on alternative energy routes adds to the region's strategic significance.

However, there has not been much sustained and high-level Euro-Atlantic engagement in the region, as the transatlantic actors' political attention to the Western Balkans has been diverted elsewhere. War in Ukraine served as a wake-up call for the EU and NATO in the Balkans. Following the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, enlargement is back on the EU agenda, as Russian aggression reinvigorated the expediency of transatlantic integration of the Western Balkans. This article examines the developments in the Western Balkans and analyzes the prospects for the Euro-Atlantic integration of the regional countries.

A Historical Overview of the Region's Transatlantic Integration

Historically, the NATO accession of Western Balkan countries has proven smoother than the EU accession. NATO accession helps facilitate the EU integration prospects of Western Balkan countries, as it requires vital structural reforms that are foundational for reforms regarding the EU membership criteria.¹ NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) Program is seen as a waiting room for NATO membership. All Western Balkan countries, except for Serbia and Kosovo, have declared intentions to join PfP or NATO.

At the 2003 Thessaloniki European Council Summit, the EU acknowledged the importance of a European future for the Balkans.² From 2003 to 2013, the EU admitted 13 new members, including two from the former Yugoslavia (Slovenia and Croatia), which contributed to EU enlargement fatigue and its reluctance to welcome new members. Critics frequently accuse Euro-Atlantic actors of prioritizing regional stability over democratization and of overlooking democratic practice issues.

1) Oya Dursun-Özkanca, "The Western Balkans in the Transatlantic Security Context," *Insight Turkey*, Volume 21, Issue 2, Spring 2019.

2) European Council, "EU-Western Balkans Summit Thessaloniki, 21 June 2003 Declaration," 10229/03 (Presse 163) 21 June 2003, Thessaloniki.

EU's Stabilization and Association Process (SAP) has three main goals: stability of SAP countries and their swift transition to market economies, enhanced regional cooperation, and eventual membership into the EU. The Instrument for Pre-Accession (IPA) Funding adopted by the EU in 2006 comprised of EUR 11.5 billion in order to assist transition and institution-building, regional integration and development, human resources, and rural development. IPA II covered the period between 2014 and 2020 and had a budget of EUR 12 billion.³ Different than IPA I, it included regional cooperation initiatives.

In 2010, NATO invited Bosnia and Herzegovina to join the Membership Action Plan (MAP). MAP is designed to give advice and support to countries with a clear goal of joining NATO. Republika Srpska (RS) is against NATO membership of the country, due to recent memories of the NATO-led air campaign against Serbs in the 1990s. NATO membership and the activation of MAP require a successful resolution of the issue of “registration of immovable defense property to the state.”⁴ Given the structure established by the Dayton Agreement, it is hard to have a centralized governance structure in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which hampers the prospects of engaging in successful reforms towards Euro-Atlantic integration of the country. Despite the continued veto from RS, in December 2018, NATO agreed to activate MAP and invited Bosnia to submit its first annual national program of political, economic, and defense reforms to bring the country in line with NATO standards.

In 2016, there was a Russian coup plot to remove Montenegro's pro-NATO Prime Minister from power. The coup attempt was thwarted, and the country became a NATO member in 2017. Serbia tends to be more pro-Russian and has a recent history of conflict with NATO.

The unresolved bilateral and multilateral conflicts prevented meaningful progress, especially in the region's EU accession. Ever since 2011, there has been the Brussels Dialogue, EU-sponsored normalization talks between Kosovo and Serbia. Normalization of bilateral relations is a prerequisite for both countries' EU membership. The Brussels Agreement, which provided agreement on politically sensitive issues such as security, the rule of law, local authorities in the Serbian-inhabited parts of Kosovo, and the judiciary, was signed in April 2013. However, its implementation has proven to be very difficult.⁵

With the initiation of the Berlin Process in 2014, the EU emphasized the importance of the Western Balkans' EU integration. Under its framework, a total of five

3) European Commission, “Overview: Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance,” European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/instruments/overview_en

4) NATO, “Membership Action Plan”, 28 March 2024, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_37356.htm

5) Donika Emini and Isidora Stakic, “Belgrade and Pristina: Lost in Normalisation?” *European Union Institute for Security Studies*, April 2018, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief%205%20Belgrade%20and%20Pristina.pdf>

conferences were held: the 2014 Berlin Summit, the 2015 Vienna Summit, the 2016 Paris Summit, the 2017 Trieste Summit, and the 2018 London Summit. In February 2018, the European Commission announced its new and ambitious strategy for the region, titled “A Credible Enlargement Perspective for and Enhanced EU Engagement with the Western Balkans,” which is also known as the EU Strategy for the Western Balkans, which the European Council adopted in May 2018.⁶ The Strategy document set a target date of accession in 2025 for Serbia and Montenegro and reemphasized the EU’s commitment to enlargement, including the remaining Western Balkan countries.⁷

Analysis of the Recent Developments

Democratic backsliding is commonplace in the region, as weak judicial systems helped authoritarian-leaning elites consolidate power. Populism, authoritarianism, and nationalism are on the rise. Market inefficiencies too are prevalent due to the legacy of the communist era.⁸ High unemployment and brain drain continue, although the World Bank projects that the GDP growth levels will return to pre-pandemic levels in 2024.⁹ There are large external deficits, public debt, and infrastructural deficiencies, as regularly noted by the country progress reports the European Commission publishes.

Moreover, the Western Balkan countries are the poorest in Europe. Corruption is especially high in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Albania.¹⁰ State capture in the region meant that the elites benefited from the existing system and became more reluctant to engage in judicial reform. The candidate countries are required to show tangible results to ensure accession to transatlantic institutions, especially regarding the rule of law, the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) of the EU, and the resolution of some long-lasting conflicts.¹¹

Having said that, there has been some good progress in the Euro-Atlantic integration process of the regional countries. Slovenia and Croatia are already members of both

6) European Council, “A Credible Enlargement Perspective for and Enhanced EU Engagement with the Western Balkans.” Sofia, COM (2018) 65 final, 2 June 2018.

7) European Commission, “Strategy for the Western Balkans: EU Sets Out New Flagship Initiatives and Support for the Reform-Driven Region.” Strasbourg, 8 February 2018, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-18-561_en.htm

8) World Bank, “Western Balkans Labor Market Trends 2018,” (March, 2018), retrieved January 31, 2019, from <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/565231521435487923/pdf/124354-WP-P158508-PUBLIC-16-3-2018-10-13-39-WBLabormarkettrends.pdf>

9) The World Bank Group, “Western Balkans Regular Economic Report”, Spring 2024, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/eca/publication/western-balkans-regular-economic-report>

10) Transparency International, “Corruption Perceptions Index”, https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2023?gad_source=1&gclid=Cj0KCCQjwvb-zBhCmARIsAAfUI2v-QX7GmV_T1vBpOwAOT4e1GeKg48RgLhekaCk-lda27opwaZb244kaAIH7EALw_wcB

11) Charles Brousseau, Vera Pachta and Chiara Grigolo, “Towards an Enlarged Union: Upholding the Rule of Law”, *International IDEA*, Policy Paper No. 30, April 2024, <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/2024-04/towards-an-enlarged-union-upholding-the-rule-of-law.pdf>

organizations, and Albania, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Slovenia are members of NATO. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia are candidate countries for the EU, whereas Bosnia and Herzegovina is an aspirant country for NATO membership.

Montenegro's EU accession negotiations opened in June 2012. Out of the 33 negotiating chapters, three have been provisionally closed. Serbia's EU accession negotiations were opened in January 2014. 22 out of 35 negotiating chapters have been opened, two of which have been provisionally closed. Albania and North Macedonia's accession negotiations were opened in July 2022. Receiving EU candidate status in December 2022, Bosnia and Herzegovina's accession negotiations were formally opened in March 2024. Kosovo applied for EU membership in December 2022 but has not yet received a candidate status.¹² Five EU member states, Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain, do not recognize Kosovo's independence. All except for Cyprus are NATO members, presenting a potential barrier against Kosovo's NATO membership in the future.

All Western Balkans, including Kosovo, now have visa-free travel programs with the EU. The EU accession prospects have facilitated economic and political reforms in the Western Balkans and improved regional cooperation and integration, as clearly seen in the case of the visa liberalization process. IPA III covers the period from 2021 to 2027. It has a budget of EUR 14.7 billion and seeks to support “political, institutional, legal, administrative, social and economic reforms ... with a view to future EU membership.”¹³

The EU nevertheless suffers from a negative image in the Western Balkans. The countries in the region perceive the EU's acceleration of Moldova and Ukraine's accession as unfair and see it as evidence demonstrating inconsistencies in the EU's enlargement approach. To illustrate, the EU did not require Moldova and Cyprus to resolve the territorial conflicts, while requiring Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo, to resolve conflicts. Furthermore, some Balkan EU member countries took advantage of their membership against other Balkan countries such as North Macedonia. Macedonia's EU membership prospects have been stalled due to the name dispute with Greece. In June 2018, the Prespa Agreement was signed with parties agreeing on a new name for the country – The Republic of North Macedonia. With the ratification of the Prespa Agreement, NATO invited North Macedonia to start its accession process on July 11, 2018, and the country and the country joined NATO in 2020.

12) André De Munter, “The Western Balkans”, Fact Sheets on the European Union, European Parliament, April 2024, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/168/the-western-balkans>

13) European Commission, “Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) III – Performance”, 2024, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-statements/instrument-pre-accession-assistance-ipa-iii-performance_en#programme-in-a-nutshell

Against the background of years of RS's consistent threats for secession from Bosnia and Herzegovina, NATO is increasingly concerned about "secessionist and divisive rhetoric, as well as malign foreign interference – including from Russia."¹⁴ Adding to the concerns was the renewal of tensions between Kosovo and Serbia. Even though Brussels Agreement and Ohrid Annex was agreed upon in February and March 2023, respectively, there has been "limited" progress on its implementation.¹⁵ Consequently, the Committee of the Permanent Representatives agreed to amend Chapter 35 with Serbia to include the obligations from the Brussels Agreement and its Ohrid Annex.¹⁶

In fact, 2023 has been the most violent and turbulent year in terms of the normalization process for Serbia and Kosovo. Violent protests against the Kosovo government's decision to bring in special police forces to allow mayors elected on April 23rd into town halls in northern Kosovo, followed by guerilla warfare, required NATO's KFOR mission's involvement in the tensions. In response to the crisis due to the arrest/kidnapping of three Kosovo Police officers by Serbian security services on June 14, 2023, the EU held an emergency meeting with Kosovo Prime Minister Kurti and Serbia President Vucic. The EU imposed "temporary and reversible" measures against Kosovo at the end of June 2023. Tensions further escalated and resulted in casualties as a result of the terrorist attack by 30 gunmen and the response from the Kosovo Police in September 2023 in Banjska.¹⁷ In a region nicknamed the powder keg of Europe, such trends cause serious concerns. Any Kosovo-Serbia border change along ethnically homogenous lines potentially undermines the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Montenegro. There is still uncertainty regarding the transatlantic integration of the region.

Recognizing the challenges of the region's EU future, the European Commission proposed a 6 billion Euros Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans in November 2023, which was approved by the European Parliament and adopted

14) Jens Stoltenberg, "Joint Press Conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg with the Chairwoman of the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Borjana Krišto", NATO, 20 November 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_220214.htm

15) European Union External Action Service, "Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue: Statement by the High Representative on the anniversary of the Agreement on the Path to Normalisation and its Implementation Annex," 17 March 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-statement-high-representative-anniversary-agreement-path-normalisation_en

16) European Western Balkans, "EU Permanent Representatives Agree on Amending Chapter 35 with Serbia to Include Ohrid Agreement", 16 April 2024, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2024/04/16/eu-permanent-representatives-agree-on-amending-chapter-35-with-serbia-to-include-ohrid-agreement/>

17) Federico Baccini, "One year after Ohrid agreement, there is little commitment from Kosovo and Serbia to its implementation", EU News, 18 March 2024, <https://www.eunews.it/en/2024/03/18/ohrid-agreement-serbia-kosovo/>

by the Council in May 2024, making the Western Balkan countries eligible to reap some benefits of the EU membership prior to accession. The precondition for the eligibility of funding is the implementation of reform agendas for socio-economic and fundamentals reforms they plan to undertake between 2024 and 2027. In case of failure to implement reforms, the Commission “may suspend payments in part or in full depending on the condition.”¹⁸ The Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans seeks to close the economic gap between the Western Balkans and the EU and ensure the implementation of wide-ranging reforms.

Conclusion

The Western Balkans “remains the last non-integrated part of Europe” and represents “unfinished business for the EU.”¹⁹ The region’s integration into the EU and NATO serves as a vital investment in European and transatlantic security. Many unresolved conflicts remain and there is an increasing appetite for irredentism and secessionism. The EU and NATO should improve their coordination in attempts to resolve outstanding issues and reenergize the enlargement process.

If the EU and NATO are unwilling to take on a leading role, other external actors such as Russia, China, or Gulf states might fill the strategic vacuum in the region. As a result of the recent revival of the rivalry between NATO and Russia in the aftermath of its annexation of Crimea in 2014 and full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia pays extra attention to the region to preserve its sphere of influence due to the cultural and historical ties it has with Orthodox Slavs and to prevent the Euro-Atlantic, especially NATO integration of the countries in the region.

While Serbia tries to strike a fine balance between its EU accession aspirations and traditional links to Russia, it will have to tackle the difficult issue of choosing one side over the other sooner rather than later. Russia maintains important ties with Montenegro, Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina due to the existence of Serb minorities in these countries. It has also been a key supporter of RS’s secessionist aspirations. Russian propaganda outlets frequently engage in misinformation campaigns against the EU and NATO.

The Berlin Process did not have a proper budgetary allocation for covering the Western Balkans Summit costs or for financing its initiatives. Providing a more concrete step towards transatlantic integration, the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans offers a more structured financial mechanism for the region’s EU accession.

18) The European Commission, “Commission Welcomes Political Agreement on the €6 billion Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans”, 4 April 2024, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-welcomes-political-agreement-eu6-billion-reform-and-growth-facility-western-balkans-2024-04-04_en

19) Ivan Vejvoda, “The Balkans: No War in Sight.” Commentary, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, 17 February 2016, <http://www.gmfus.org/commentary/balkans-no-war-sight>

This may be the push the political elites in the region might need to work towards reforms for their ultimate transatlantic integration. The Euro-Atlantic integration and enlargement of the EU and NATO are pathways to maintaining stability, peace, and establishing democracy in the Western Balkans. It remains to be seen how decisively the transatlantic actors and their Western Balkans counterparts will commit to making progress on transatlantic integration.