



BiEPAG



Between a rock and a hard place: Public opinion and the EU integration in the Western Balkans

Citizens of countries in the Western Balkans are still, overall, positive about the prospects of their countries joining the European Union. However, the path to EU membership is a long one and at the moment the people in the Balkans are caught between a rock and a hard place. The EU accession process seems endless and current member states are doing little to improve that; indeed some appear to be putting further obstacles in the way. Moreover, the de-politicisation of the accession process is having unintended consequences in that it does not allow voters to properly hold their elected representatives to account. This is the rock.

The hard place is made up of the governments, politicians and institutions in the Balkan countries, which are the focal point of people's dissatisfaction. Publics are sceptical about their governments' commitment to European integration and this undermines the value of democracy.

To move beyond the rock and the hard place, the European Commission must speed up the implementation of the revised enlargement methodology, with more meaningful incentives to continue reform. Western Balkans countries should be invited to contribute to the upcoming exercise in imagining the Future of Europe. The European Union should also reinforce current support for citizens and civil society to hold their governments to account and end the epidemic of state capture in the region.

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A key promise of democracy is to empower people to make their own decisions and have their voices counted in politics. A growing problem of contemporary democracies is that voters no longer believe they can influence how their countries are governed, even when they agree that elections are free and fair. The mandates given to political leaders by ordinary citizens in the course of election campaigns often finish under a pile of many other legally-binding mandates that governments have acquired over time from the likes of the European Commission, the European Central Bank, various courts, and international financial institutions. The gradual de-nationalisation of much policy-making, especially in post-Maastricht Europe, has left electorates feeling orphaned by their political representatives and profoundly frustrated with conventional politics.²

Being a citizen of a Western Balkan country seeking membership to the European Union (EU) does not make the situation any better. When it comes to the Western Balkans' European integration process, people from the EU-aspiring countries of the region are effectively caught between a rock and a hard place. The rock is constituted by the technocratic nature of the European integration process and EU capitals' indecisiveness on the enlargement dossier. The hard place is made up of the Balkan governments' inability – and often unwillingness – to act in an accountable and representative manner while in office.

It is one thing to expect the region's citizens to acquiesce to the Commission's model of change through 'reforms without politics' if the outcome is good governance and EU accession. It is quite a stretch, however, to assume that the current rather permissive popular consensus in the region

regarding the depoliticisation of policymaking is sustainable when it is delivering neither economic and political convergence nor much progress on the formal EU track. The national politics of European integration in the region will most likely end up disappointing, because it can easily escape public scrutiny and make Brussels a convenient scapegoat. But the EU can still prevent popular disenchantment with integration and democracy by strengthening the credibility of the region's European perspective and by adopting an uncompromising stance against corruption in Western Balkan governments.

The rock

The EU accession process is set up in such a way that relevant law-making in the Balkan countries sidesteps policy deliberation. Instead, it translates into the adoption and implementation of EU-compatible standards. While Brussels also curtails the ability of political parties in the member states to offer meaningful policy alternatives to their citizens, at least the EU capitals get a say over the decisions taken at European level that they are later obliged to respect. As aspiring members, the Western Balkan countries are obliged to take the EU conditions or leave them. This dominance of the process of EU integration in the region makes it difficult for their politicians to represent and respond to their voters, even if they genuinely wanted to do so. More than that, however, it has the unintended consequence that it often allows political elites in the region to evade their campaign promises, "selling all unpopular policies as 'made in Brussels', while smuggling into their agenda their own pet projects."³ Without the ability to hold their leaders accountable, there is a risk that people in the region start losing faith in democratic representative institutions and processes.

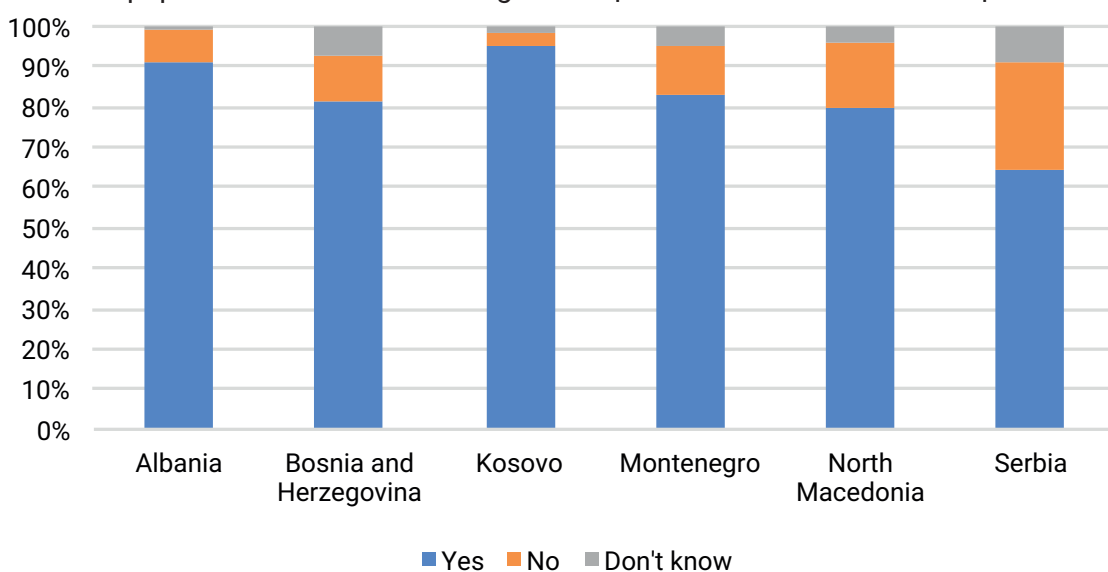


Table 1: Are you in favour of your country joining the European Union?

- 1 We thank Donika Emini and Natasha Wunsch for their comments.
- 2 Mair, Peter (2013), *Ruling the void. The hollowing of Western democracy*, London: Verso.
- 3 Krastev, Ivan (2008), "Europe's other legitimacy crisis", *Open Democracy*.



So far, citizens in the EU-aspiring countries of the region have not rejected the Commission's pressure and impact on their national politics. According to a recent Ipsos survey, commissioned by the European Fund for the Balkans in October 2020³, public opinion in the region continues to be overwhelmingly in favour of membership to the European Union (82.5% on average). Even in Serbia – the region's biggest sceptic – a majority of 64.1% of respondents support their country's goal of joining the EU (see Table 1).

If people in the Western Balkans still support the EU integration process, it is arguably because they see it as an opportunity for much-needed change in their countries' quality of governance and economic performance. Indeed, the Ipsos poll (2020) reveals that, throughout the region, citizens positively evaluate the EU's role in national political (39.7%) and economic (40.3%) reforms (see Table 2). This is almost twice as many people as those assessing negatively the relevant support from Brussels (22.8% and 21.4% respectively). Moreover, it is likely that people in the Balkan countries accept the 'stick' of European integration because they value the other EU 'carrots', which include freedom to work and travel but also peace and security.

at key decision-making points on enlargement to block or derail the process. These incursions have often been on grounds that have more to do with domestic politics than with the process that has been laid out or the state of reforms in the Balkan countries.⁴

Most recently, Bulgaria refused to approve the EU membership negotiation framework for North Macedonia over issues of history and language, thus effectively obstructing the already long-delayed start of accession talks for Skopje. This decision ignores the good track record of reforms in North Macedonia: the country received the most positive assessment in this year's Commission reports on the Balkan countries. A clash with Greece over the country's name had previously frustrated North Macedonia's efforts to join the EU for a decade, until the two finally resolved the issue in 2019.

The process has also suffered setbacks in the case of Kosovo. Despite the Commission's recommendation and the European Parliament's approval in 2018 to grant visa liberalisation to Kosovo, its progress has been stuck in the Council. Fear of potential massive emigration from Kosovo into the EU has made member states like France

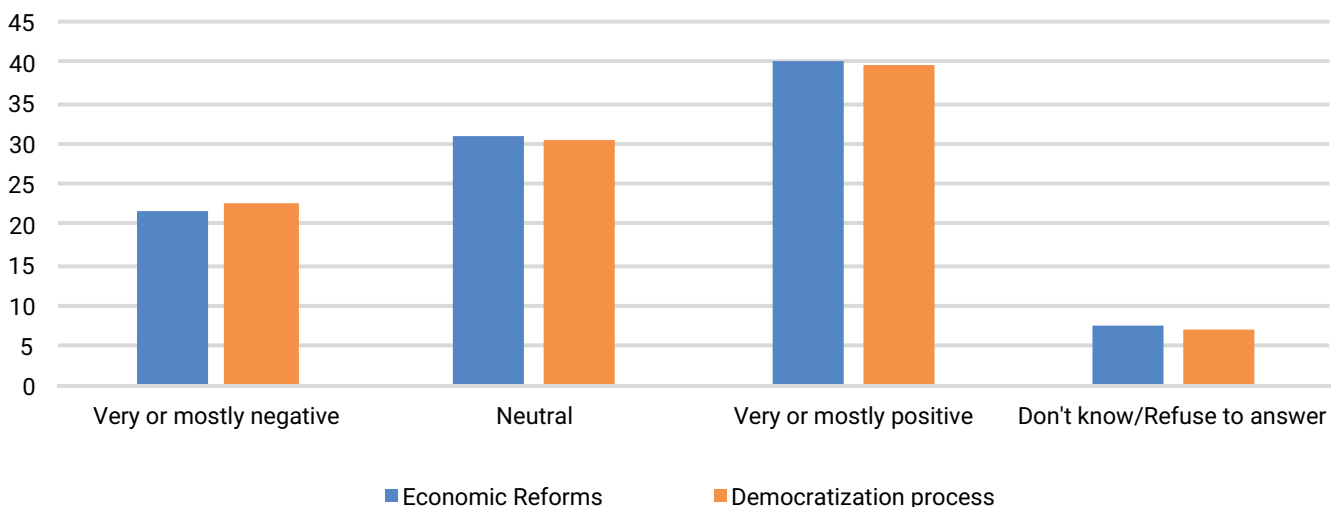


Table 2: How would you assess EU's role in your country's economic reforms and democratization processes?

How is the Union capitalising on the faith that citizens in the Western Balkans seem to put into it? The short answer is not very well. The EU's leverage in the region rests on its attraction; its attraction rests, to a great extent, on its credibility in its dealings with countries in the region. But this has become evanescent over the past decade, ever since EU capitals began to make a habit of disregarding the European Commission's opinion and intervening

and the Netherlands averse to making a decision on the subject, even if Kosovo has met all technical requirements to be included in a visa-free regime with the Union. Moreover, the position of the five EU countries⁵ that do not recognise Kosovo's independence is based on fears of the impact of Kosovo's statehood on other cases of national concern to them.

4 Balfour, Rosa and Stratulat, Corina (eds.) (2015), "EU member states and enlargement towards the Balkans", EPC Issue Paper, Brussels: European Policy Centre.

5 Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Spain, and Slovakia.

Such examples are no longer the exception but increasingly the norm of how EU capitals approach enlargement towards the region. The member states' assertiveness on the dossier could wreck the process, which is already sluggish and struggling to reap successes.

Public opinion in the region is still positive about European integration, but it is not unaware of these unfolding dynamics. The Ipsos survey (2020) indicates that 52.1% of respondents from across the region are dissatisfied with their country's prog-

ress towards EU accession. As shown in Table 3, one of the cited reasons for dissatisfaction is precisely the slow pace of the process, especially in the front-runners Montenegro (17.7%) and Serbia (17.6%). For Serbia, this is the highest-ranked source of dissatisfaction mentioned in the survey. 9.4% of those surveyed in North Macedonia and 11.7% in Serbia also complain about the growing number of EU demands and are concerned that "the EU does not want us." The conditions set by neighbouring countries are frustrating for 9% of respondents in North Macedonia.

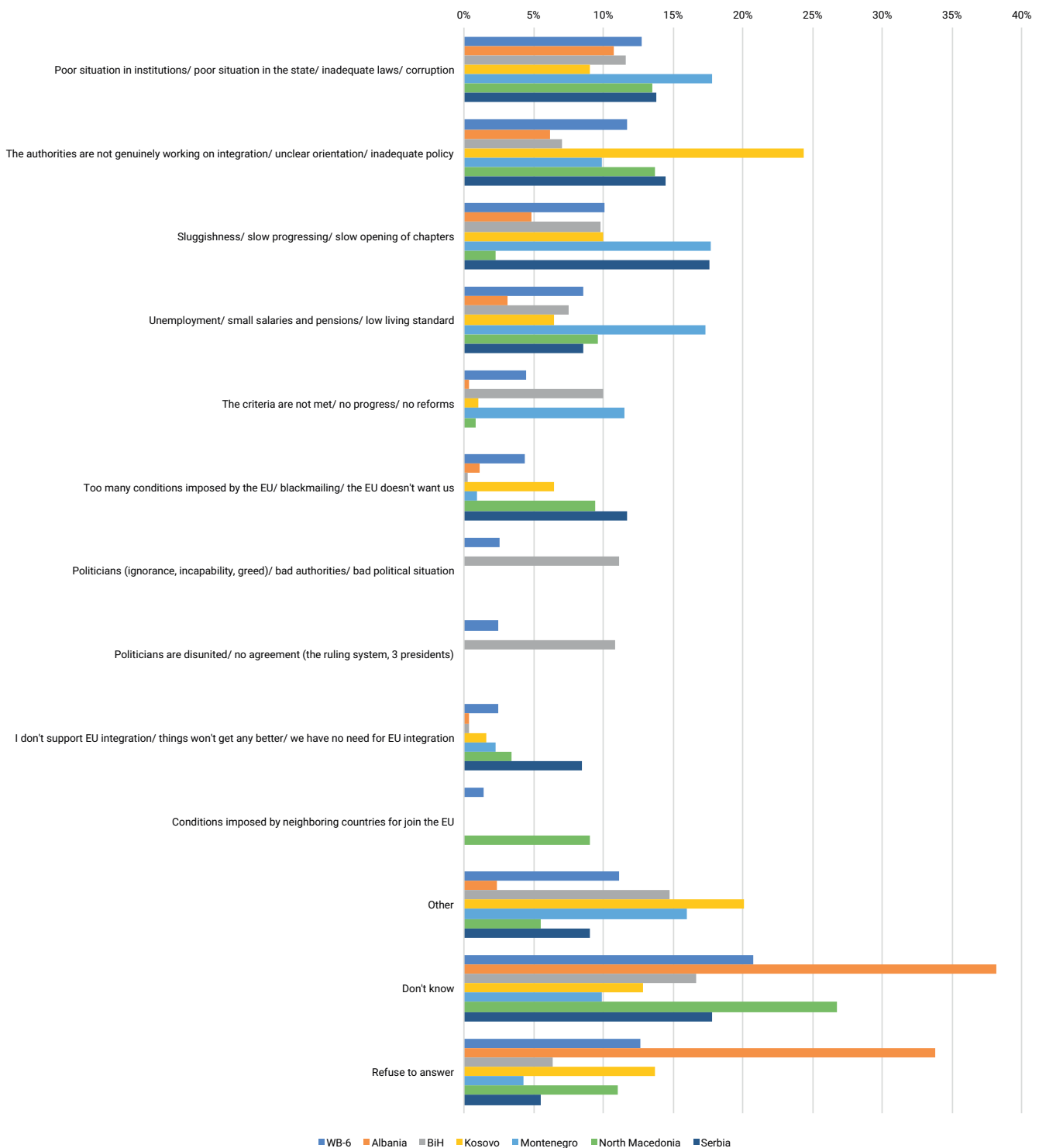


Table 3: What is the reason for your dissatisfaction with progress in regard to EU accession?



While still small, these numbers indicate that public opinion in the Western Balkans is attentive and sensitive to signals from the EU. In fact, people's latent scepticism becomes even more obvious when considering the significant sections of the region's population (20.8% on average) in the Ipsos survey (2020) that believe that their countries will never join the EU: 32.7% in Serbia, 28.1% in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 25.7% in North Macedonia, and 20.9% in Albania. These results are even more significant if one includes the percentage of those who think their country will need more than 20 years to enter the Union. This adds up to more than 44.9% of respondents in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 42% in Serbia, 40.5% in North Macedonia, and 36.8% in Albania who expect their country to become an EU member only after 2040, or never.

The hard place

For now, according to the Ipsos survey (2020), the focal point of people's dissatisfaction is their national politicians and institutions (see Table 4). In particular, more respondents from Kosovo (24%) than anywhere else in the region doubt that authorities are genuinely committed to European integration; these people no longer believe their leaders' avowed support for the EU agenda. This is also the highest-ranked reason for popular frustration in the Western Balkans overall. Public discontent with corrupt and dysfunctional state institutions scores significantly as well, especially in Montenegro (18%). About 14% of respondents in Serbia and North Macedonia agree that domestic political elites and institutions are mainly responsible for the lack of progress or reforms in European integration.

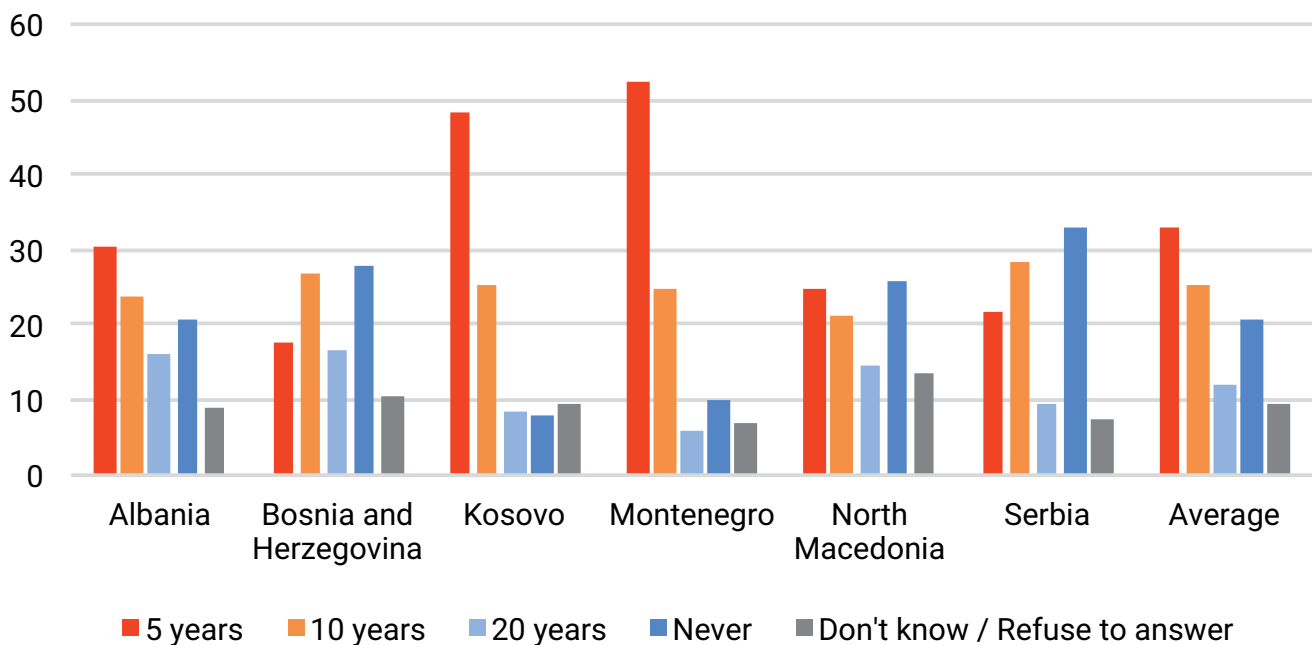


Table 4: Do you think EU accession will happen over next 5/10/20 years or never?

Consequently, no amount of grand political statements of support made, for example, at Western Balkans Summits, or intermediary rewards promised or offered by the EU (like market access, enhanced financial aid or visa liberalisation) is likely to suffice in the long term to continue to win people's hearts and minds in the region. The currently high level of popular support for the EU in the region will probably only be as sustainable as the accession prospect proves credible. The time when the EU could take the pro-European sentiment in the Balkan countries for granted is thus running out.

People's perceptions are not misguided. After almost two decades of European integration, democratic performance throughout the region has not yet acquired a positive dynamic. Neither the adoption of democratic constitutions nor the EU's rigorous democratic conditionality have managed to overcome informal power structures, state capture, and patronage, but have instead rather consolidated them.⁶ The rise of strong Balkan rulers has eroded the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary, and the freedom of the media in these countries, allowing autocratically-minded leaders to govern

6 Richter, Solveig and Wunsch, Natasha (2020), "Money, power, glory: the linkages between EU conditionality and state capture in the Western Balkans", *Journal of European Public Policy* 27(1), 41-62.

unchecked. Despite reporting on the worrisome degree of personal rule in the Western Balkans,⁷ the Commission has effectively turned a blind eye to law-defying politicians in the region whenever they have delivered on issues of high priority for the EU member states, like closing borders to refugees, radicalisation and terrorism, or regional stability. The growing practice in the Council of withholding promised rewards in spite of tangible progress further demotivates Balkan politicians from implementing the EU reform agenda.

By paying lip service to the goal of European integration while in fact guarding their own interest and that of a few selected foreign companies⁸, Western Balkan governments did little to prevent their countries leaping from one economic regression to another. Since the 2008 financial and economic crisis, the process of economic convergence with the EU in terms of GDP per capita has been very slow or non-existent. Unable to accelerate economic development by correcting structural problems, such as a lack of public and private investments or a rapidly aging population, the Western Balkan citizens have been helplessly gazing into a future of relentless deprivation. The Coronavirus pandemic is likely to further exacerbate the socio-economic problems of the region, hastening economic divergence between the EU and the region and creating a *de facto* enclave of underdevelopment in the middle of Europe.⁹

Economic hardship and a lack of opportunities in the region have stimulated a positive appreciation of economic prosperity in the EU that is also evident in current migration trends. According to a recent study,¹⁰ every two minutes one person leaves the Western Balkans as an economic migrant in search for work in a member state. People in the region often choose exit because they feel unable to change the political course of their countries. Instead of 'liberating' citizens, the technical European integration process thus seems to have inadvertently liberated political elites from the constraints of democratic accountability. If there is no alternative to national "stabilitocracy"¹¹ in the shadow of European integration at 'home', people will unsurprisingly seek alternatives abroad.

The way out

The politics of pressure, whereby corrupt governments find themselves squeezed between angry publics and an uncompromising Council, has proven its limits. As member states continue to diverge in functional terms from agreed standards and procedures on enlargement, the policy's credibility and leverage in the Western Balkans is waning. The constant breaks on these countries' EU tracks risk derailing even the most reform-minded and consensus-driven politicians in the region. To keep the process moving, the Commission ends up having to work with regional political elites who have questionable democratic credentials. People in the region might feel increasingly frustrated with their leaders' performances, but they are unable to hold them accountable in a depoliticised European integration process. In itself, this deals a heavy blow to the legitimacy and capacity of Western Balkan systems. Ultimately, if anyone is currently 'sandwiched', it's the people. They are squeezed between two half-hearted commitments: that of the EU to enlargement, and that of their political elites to the reform agenda.

It is unlikely that the EU can do much to mend the perception in the Western Balkans that democracy in the region has moved beyond popular involvement and control – a widespread view also in the member states¹². But the EU can still do a lot to improve the credibility of enlargement policy and to support the public's struggle to stamp out corruption and hold governments to account.

To that end, the implementation of the revised enlargement methodology adopted by the Commission earlier this year, on the basis of French proposals, should no longer be delayed. Since the aim of this revision was to make the process more credible, predictable, and political, the Commission should swiftly apply it for Albania and North Macedonia and clarify how it will also be adapted to the cases of Montenegro and Serbia, which are already negotiating with the EU and have expressed willingness to adopt it.

7 For example in the Commission's 2018 Communication on enlargement, "A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans", COM(2018) 65 final, p. 3.

8 Bartlett, Will, Krasniqi, Besnik and Ahmetbašić, Jasmina (2019), "Attracting FDI to the Western Balkans: Special Economic Zones and Smart Specialisation Strategies", in *Croatian Economic Survey* 21(2), 5-35

9 Bonomi, Matteo and Reljić, Dušan (2017), "The EU and the Western Balkans: so near and yet so far", *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) Commentary*, SWP.

10 Bonomi, Matteo, Merja, Albana, Töglhofer, Theresia and Reljić, Dušan (2020), "Make or break moment: EU enlargement in Southeast Europe in pandemic times", *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*, p. 5.

11 Kmezić, Marko and Bieber, Florian (eds.) (2017), "The crisis of democracy in the Western Balkans. An anatomy of Stabilitocracy and the limits of EU democracy promotion", *Biepag Policy Study*.

12 Mair (2013), op. cit



To a large extent, the enforcement of the new approach to EU enlargement hinges on the member states' ability to consent to the negotiating framework for North Macedonia. This recalls the long-standing need to better specify the division of labour between the Commission and EU capitals on the dossier. Given the difficulties of the member states to reach unanimity on enlargement, the Council should revisit the possibility of introducing qualified majority voting, at least for all intermediary stages of the EU accession process.¹³ This would grant member states a strong political role, as per the intention of the new methodology. Yet it would also prevent them from frustrating the process while it is ongoing, which is precisely what currently undermines the policy's transformative leverage.

The idea of the new approach – to pepper the region's strenuous reform path with more frequent incentives for the Balkan leaders to make steady progress – has also become increasingly relevant, especially in the post-COVID-19 reality. To help Western Balkan countries cushion the blow of the pandemic and relaunch economic convergence with the EU, the Union should provide more generous support to the region – far beyond the Economic and Investment Plan announced by the Commission this October. The EU should empower the Balkan countries through smart, inclusive, and probably expensive policies.¹⁴ For example, gradually opening the European Structural and Investment Funds (such as to support infrastructural projects), extending the use of the EU's financial stability mechanisms, allowing the region to participate in the Common Agricultural Policy or enabling circular migration – all these warrant serious consideration.

In today's complex and unpredictable world, it is imperative for the EU to strengthen and diversify the ways in which it reaches out to its natural allies in the region, who, in any case, share the same problems and interests. One concrete way for the EU to do so is to invite political leaders and citizens from Western Balkan countries to join, on a consultative basis, the activities and discussions held in the context of the upcoming Conference on the Future of Europe. Cooperating beyond the scope of the enlargement dossier to co-shape a common European future could also help restore the region's significant degree of scepticism in the promise of EU membership.¹⁵

Last but not least, the EU should ally with the people in the region against Balkan governments that prove unwilling to fight endemic corruption. The EU's failure to confront persistent stagnation or backsliding on democratic reforms in the region leaves the impression that it is willing to trade off democracy for the promise of stability in the Western Balkans. In the absence of a democratic *acquis*, the EU is still searching for a proper strategy to transform the countries of the region into sustainable democracies. It also needs objectively verifiable indicators to measure their progress. Meanwhile, however, the EU should not make allowances for leaders in the region who clearly dodge their commitment to democracy. The magnitude of calling out 'state capture' in the Commission's 2018 strategy towards the region, or of critically evaluating the different countries in annual reports, greatly diminishes if the same rhetoric is not echoed by EU officials or member state politicians traveling to the region. By doing all of the above, the EU would make national politics in the Balkans less of a hard place and break down the challenge of its current approach to the region.

Methodology

The primary data used in this BiEPAG policy analysis come from a public opinion poll conducted in the six Western Balkan countries in October 2020. Survey was conducted on a nationally representative sample consisted of minimum 1000 respondents aged 18+, through telephone and online interviews, by the following ratio: Albania (phone + online, 90:10), Bosnia and Herzegovina (phone + online, 80:20), Kosovo (phone, 100), Montenegro (phone + online, 90:10), North Macedonia (phone + online, 90:10) and Serbia (phone + online, 80:20). Results are presented in percentage and are subject to following statistical errors: Albania $\pm 3.39\%$, Bosnia and Herzegovina $\pm 3.39\%$, Kosovo $\pm 3.32\%$, Montenegro $\pm 3.36\%$, North Macedonia $\pm 3.34\%$ and Serbia $\pm 3.38\%$. Data collection was implemented by Ipsos Strategic Marketing.

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- 13 Cvijic, Srdjan, Kirchner, Marie Jelenka, Kirova, Iskra and Nechev, Zoran (2019), "From enlargement to the unification of Europe: Why the European Union needs a Directorate General Europe for future Members and Association Countries", Open Society Foundations.
- 14 Lazarević, Milena and Stratulat, Corina (2020), "Letter to Macron: details matter for enlargement reform", EPC Commentary, Brussels: European Policy Centre.
- 15 Lazarević, Milena and Stratulat, Corina (2020), "The Conference on the Future of Europe: is the EU still serious about the Western Balkans?", EPC Discussion Paper, Brussels: European Policy Centre.





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The EFB supports the process of affirming the efficacy of EU enlargement policy across the Western Balkans, improving regional cooperation amongst civil society organisations based on solidarity and demand-driven dialogue. It provides means and platforms for informed and empowered citizens to take action demanding accountable institutions and democracy. The focus is on continuous reforms of the policies and practices of the Western Balkans countries on their way to EU accession.

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