



Key takeaways from the Thessaloniki gathering of EFB, BiEPAG and guests

The EU enlargement in the Western Balkans is stuck. Even if the current stumbling blocks are resolved, the process is out of steam in the EU and countries of the region. While there are many technical improvements imaginable and also desirable for the accession process, the question is to what extent to dwell on the technicalities of the process. In the absence of political will, the best designed mechanism will continue to not be able to deliver. Whereas it merits considering new options to accommodate the legitimate concerns over rule of law and democracy among some member states and offering interim steps as incentives for the countries of the region, such as through staged accession, not all efforts toward a European future for the Western Balkans should focus on process alone.

Instead, it is important to consider other approaches, which include revisiting the tools of the EU to engage with the region. Over the past decade, EU foreign policy has rested on enlargement as its main driving force. It is important to consider other ways of dealing with the open challenges in the region, from Serbia-Kosovo relations to the internal (and external) challenges to statehood in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Another essential question is how to mobilize support and pressure for reforms as a grass roots process without the immediate prospect of EU membership. Social movements, tackling environmental concerns, corruption and bad governments might not fly the EU flag—its symbolism is stale and too much associated with incumbent stabilocrats—but their goals are the rules and values on which European integration is founded.

Finally, the “European (as in EU) future” of the region should not be understood as a monolith and the main challenge to a value based, democratic integration of the region might not be other external actors, but different visions of Europe. An illiberal and authoritarian vision of Europe, as promoted by Viktor Orban and others within the EU, offers a false hope to the Western Balkans. It might have a space for the Western Balkans in the EU, but without a liberal democracy and with their function reduced to authoritarian border guards of Europe. This vision has a dangerous trickle-down effect with an increasingly hegemonic, nationalist, and authoritarian understanding of the region and Serbia’s role, promoted by its current president. These illiberal and authoritarian versions of Europe and the Western Balkans are not contained to one country but risk contaminating the countries beyond. “Europe” needs to start acting on these trends, as they are threatening the self-understanding of being a value-based community, and for not losing citizens both in the EU, but also outside that still see the EU as a lighthouse of democracy and rule of law.

Reinvigorating the idea of the Western Balkans in the Europe thus entails not just geopolitical competition but also a competition of values and the very notion of what is meant by Europe.