



# The EU's re-engagement with the Western Balkans: A new chapter long overdue

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*"We must find unity when it comes to the Western Balkans, once and for all. Should we not, our immediate neighbourhood will be shaped by others."*

State of the Union address by President Juncker to the European Parliament, September 2018

## Key points for policymakers

2018 was dominated by deep divisions among the EU member states despite the great expectations set by the European Commission's February 2018 strategy paper. A major effort will now be required to restore credibility to the EU's enlargement agenda and ensure a genuine re-engagement with the Western Balkans. It will be up to the new Commission to regain a leadership role and give the integration of the region into the EU the priority it deserves.

## Policy recommendations

The European Commission should ensure that all the recommendations contained in its February 2018 strategy paper be followed up. To that end,

it should incorporate the proposed concrete actions into the next enlargement communication strategy and country reports so as to make the reports more operational.

The European Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS), together with the EU member states, should adopt a more pro-active diplomatic effort in resolving bilateral disputes in the Western Balkan region.

The European Commission should maintain the regular timing of early April for adopting its annual communication on enlargement and country reports, to allow sufficient time for follow up at the European Council in June.

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The European Council in June should reaffirm the EU's commitment to the enlargement agenda by deciding on the start of accession negotiations with both Albania and Macedonia, and the granting of candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina, assuming they will have fulfilled the conditions set by the June 2018 European Council.

Depending on the EU's renewed commitment to enlargement, the Berlin Process should continue and focus more on societal issues such as reconciliation, education and culture.

Tackling environment and management of natural resources requires greater attention from both the EU and Western Balkan countries.

The new Commission, to take office in November, should:

- return to the old practice and appoint a Commissioner responsible exclusively for the enlargement portfolio;
- implement a more intrusive monitoring mechanism of reforms in the Western Balkan countries and make more systematic use of peer review missions as suggested by the February 2018 strategy paper;
- ensure that civil society actors at both national and local level in the Western Balkan countries form an integral part of the accession process;
- open up the structural and cohesion funds to benefit the Western Balkan region, in addition to the extra funds envisaged under the Multi Annual Financial Framework;
- together with the EU member states, include the Western Balkan countries in Informal European Councils and other inter-ministerial meetings, as proposed in the February 2018 strategy paper;
- aim to have formal accession negotiations opened with all Western Balkan countries during its mandate.

## Introduction

Instead of marking a decisive step in the EU's re-engagement with the Western Balkans, the year 2018 brought to the fore the deep divisions among the EU member states regarding the EU's enlargement agenda and the future integration of the region into the EU. Despite the best intentions of the European Commission, evidenced in its February 2018 strategy paper "A credible enlargement perspective for an enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans",<sup>1</sup> (1) the year ended with little to indicate any qualitative change in the EU's approach.

While the EU/Western Balkan summit hosted by the Bulgarian Presidency in Sofia in May was a welcome signal that the Western Balkan region was at least back on the EU's radar, the results achieved were disappointingly modest. Even if times have changed and EU leaders reaffirmed their commitment to the 'European perspective' for the region, it was a sharp contrast to the results of the previous EU/Western Balkan summit of Thessaloniki in 2003.

This was followed by an even more disappointing General Affairs and European Council in June 2018. While reaffirming the EU's commitment to enlargement, it did not succeed in adopting the Commission's recommendation on the opening of accession negotiations with Albania and Macedonia. It gave a vague promise that relevant decisions would be taken at the June 2019 European Council, depending on the progress made.<sup>2</sup>

With the mixed signals coming from EU member states, there is no guarantee that this promise will be kept. Should the eurosceptic populist agenda that tends to equate the enlargement debate with increased immigration gain traction with the voting public at the European Parliament elections on 23-26 May, this is likely to impact on the attitude of member states at the subsequent European Council in June. The most recent Eurobarometer showed some ambivalence of EU citizens towards further enlargement, with 44% in favour and 46% against (majority support in 16 out of 27 EU member countries, with negative views in the remaining 11).<sup>3</sup>

If there is no determined push back against these trends and a greater effort by the EU and its member states to communicate all the benefits that have come from arguably the EU's most successful foreign policy, it will be up to the new Commission which takes office in November 2019 to make a fresh start and attempt to restore credibility to the EU's enlargement policy.

## The Juncker Commission

When the then incoming President Jean Claude Juncker announced in June 2014 that there would be no new enlargement during his mandate, little did he realise the negative impact this statement would have on the Western Balkan region. Technically of course it was a correct

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<sup>1</sup> Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions, COM (2018)65 final.

<sup>2</sup> Council of the European Union: Council conclusions on Enlargement and Stabilisation and Association Process, 26 June 2018; European Council, Council of the European Union: European Council conclusions, 28 June 2018. [www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press-release/2018/06/29/20180628-euco-conclusions-final/](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press-release/2018/06/29/20180628-euco-conclusions-final/).

<sup>3</sup> Standard Eurobarometer 89; Spring 2018. "The views of Europeans on the European Union priorities", page 25. <http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publications>.

statement, since both Montenegro and Serbia which had started accession negotiations in June 2012 and January 2014 respectively, were nowhere near conclusion. But this did little to assuage the hurt feelings in the region at a time when the reform process was already veering off track in a number of the countries concerned.

The perceived downgrading of the enlargement portfolio and reduced attention to the situation in the Western Balkan region was reflected in various ways. The new Commissioner appointed for this area was given responsibility for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, as had been the case with his predecessor, but this was contrary to the practice in place from the previous enlargement exercises, where the Commissioner's portfolio was purely for enlargement policy. A portfolio covering so many countries meant less Commission leadership and reduced EU visibility in the Western Balkan region just when it is most needed.

Another illustration of how the region had fallen off the EU's radar screen is the limited number of times the Western Balkans featured on the European Council's agenda in the years 2014 to 2017 in the context of enlargement. It is true that from 2015, the Western Balkans featured frequently in European Council debates but this was purely in the context of security/counter terrorism issues and the need to stem migration flows.<sup>4</sup>

When the EU was confronted with the refugee/migrant crisis in 2015, this changed the whole narrative on enlargement and on the EU's approach to the Western Balkan region, particularly regarding those countries in the frontline of the human wave that swept across Europe. Instead of maintaining focus on the fundamental reforms that were placed at the heart of the EU accession process back in 2011, the attention changed to one of ensuring secure EU borders and stability at all costs in the Western Balkan region. Having "strong and stable governments" was foremost in the minds of EU leaders at that time, with elected government officials from some EU member states openly supporting the ruling parties even when Ministers and officials from those same parties were already under investigation for abuse of power and corruption, as was the case in Macedonia.<sup>5</sup> Violations of the rule of law and deterioration in democratic standards were either ignored or brushed under the carpet.

As if to prove the point, the reasons given by Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orbán in granting asylum to the former Macedonian Prime Minister and convicted felon Nikola Gruevski, who fled the country last November to avoid a two year prison sentence, was his unstinting support in the refugee crisis and securing the borders to prevent the migrants from entering the EU during his term in office (from 2006 to 2016 ). There was no mention of the convictions and ongoing investigations for corruption facing Gruevski.

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<sup>4</sup> The European Council and the Western Balkans – Overview of discussions since the Lisbon Treaty. EPRS European Parliamentary Research Service; author: Suzana Elena Anghel, European Council Oversight Unit. PE.615.678 – May 2018.

<sup>5</sup> "A decisive year for the EU's re-engagement with the Western Balkans"; page 3; CEPS Policy Insights, No.2018/01, January 2018.

It was only in March 2017, following the visit of High Representative Federica Mogherini to the region, when she saw for herself the extent of the malaise, that the EU suddenly realised that it could no longer afford to take the region for granted. The subsequent European Council meeting referred to the “fragile situation in the Western Balkans”, and stressed that the “EU remains committed and engaged at all levels to support them in conducting EU-oriented reforms and projects”.<sup>6</sup>

This was followed by President Juncker’s reference to maintaining “a credible enlargement perspective for the Western Balkans” in his 2017 State of the Union Address to the European Parliament, a welcome change to his initial statement of 2014. However, this came too late to stop the serious backsliding in reforms across the region. For far too long, the European Commission and indeed the EEAS ignored repeated warnings from civil society organisations and the shrinking number of independent media, themselves victims of the increasingly authoritarian behaviour of the region’s leaders.

The subsequent February 2018 strategy paper was the first time that the European Commission had articulated in clear and, at times, stark language, all that was wrong in the Western Balkans and the need for urgent action on the part of the countries in the region. It was also a strong and long overdue political message addressed to EU member states for enhanced engagement, underlining that the “merit-based prospect of EU membership for the Western Balkans is in the Union’s very own political, security and economic interest”.<sup>7</sup>

With not much time left before the end of the current Commission’s mandate, this document, with many of its detailed and very concrete actions yet to be implemented, should constitute the basis on which the new Commission prepares its enlargement strategy.

## Deteriorating environment in the Western Balkan region

### (a) Political climate:

Despite the renewed, albeit limited, focus of the EU on the Western Balkan region, and the odd rays of sunshine piercing the dark clouds here and there, the overall situation has not improved during the past year. Hard-line nationalist rhetoric continues to find a willing audience. Weak parliamentary institutions coupled with the absence of a culture of political dialogue and compromise have rendered society even more fractured and polarised than heretofore. Reforms in the ‘fundamentals’ of the EU accession process have had a mixed record. Despite the progress registered in terms of laws and regulations adopted, there has been little impact in terms of changing habits and mindsets in societies built on patronage where who you know is the quickest way to get things done.

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<sup>6</sup> Conclusion by the President of the European Council, paragraph 1V, European Council, 9/3/2017.

<sup>7</sup> Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions, COM ( 2018)65 final, Op.cit, page 1.

## (b) Socio-economic climate:

The region also suffers from continued high levels of unemployment, despite slight improvements in relation to previous years and estimated growth rates reaching an average of 3.5% during 2018, according to the latest report from the World Bank.<sup>8</sup> Regional poverty levels remain at 23% overall. Youth unemployment remains a major issue, ranging from 23% in Serbia to 55% in Kosovo. These levels will likely continue until such time as improved education opportunities provide the skills needed in the labour market. The lack of investment in quality education is adding to the growing inequalities throughout the region, with Serbia and Macedonia having the highest levels of income inequality in Europe.<sup>9</sup> It is estimated that even with the injection of additional EU funds, it will take decades for the region to reach average EU income levels. Foreign direct investment in the region meanwhile remains limited, with the average stock per capita at just one seventh of the EU average.<sup>10</sup> This is not likely to change without an improved business and legal environment and greater investment in human capital. The EU, which receives over 70% of Western Balkan trade in goods, will need to adopt a more flexible and differentiated approach towards the region, opening up structural funds and supporting strengthened economic governance.<sup>11</sup>

Recent studies from the European Environment Agency, as well as from the UN and World Health Organisation, have pointed to the debilitating effects of pollution and environmental degradation across the region.<sup>12</sup> The capitals of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia are among the top most polluted cities in Europe. Failure to devote sufficient priority to the environment and proper management of natural resources will have serious socio-economic consequences.

Education meanwhile continues to be divided along ethnic lines, thus perpetuating the alienation in society between the different ethnic groups. This is particularly the case in both Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Macedonia, despite the best efforts in the latter case of civil society organisations promoting intercultural programmes at primary and secondary school levels. If government support is lacking, there is not much hope of achieving integrated multi-ethnic societies.

## (c) Bilateral disputes:

The deterioration in relations between Kosovo and Serbia has underlined the critical challenge of resolving the many bilateral disputes in the region. The normalisation talks between the leadership in Pristina and Belgrade brokered by the High Representative have yet to reach a level of intensity that would pre-empt further escalation of tensions between both sides. The recent imposition by Kosovo of 100% tariffs on imports from both Serbia and Bosnia and

<sup>8</sup> Western Balkans Regular Economic Report, World Bank, Fall 2018, published 4 October 2018.

<sup>9</sup> "Unequal Chances and Unjust Outcomes – Confronting Inequality in SEE", Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, May, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> World Bank Report, Op.cit, page 6.

<sup>11</sup> "The EU and the Westren Balkans: So near and yet so far"; Reljic and Bonomi, SWP comment, 2017/C 53, December 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Air Pollution in Europe - 2018; EEA Report No.12/2018.

Herzegovina is a case in point. The hardening of Serbia's attitude in blocking Kosovo's membership of Interpol and other international bodies, and the EU's continued delays in granting visa liberalisation, despite Kosovo having met all the requirements including ratification of the border demarcation agreement with neighbouring Montenegro, have all contributed to a distinctly sour mood in Kosovo. The imposition of tariffs is seen as a sign of desperation, a bit like Don Quixote fighting with windmills. There is a real danger however that this stand-off could escalate even further if EU mediation efforts are not stepped up, and the normalisation talks brought back on track.

Looming in the background is the proposed land swap or 'border correction' to use the term of Kosovo's President Hashim Thaci, between Kosovo and Serbia. This would involve re-drawing the map in the heart of Europe with the northern part of Kosovo inhabited by a majority of around 70,000 Serbs transferred to Serbia in exchange for the Presevo Valley where a smaller number of ethnic Albanians live (approximately 55,000). According to reports this has been the subject of extensive discussions between both Thaci and Serbian President Vucic. Although Chancellor Merkel has underlined many times the inviolability of the territorial integrity of the Western Balkans, there are growing indications both within the EU and the US that they would accept whatever solution is agreed between the two leaders in return for Serbia's recognition of Kosovo. But here lies the problem. The two leaders may agree on a land swap, but such an arrangement is likely to be rejected by a large section of the population on both sides. Already many civil society organisations have openly expressed serious reservations about this proposed arrangement, which would in any case fly in the face of all that the EU has fought for over the past decades in the region, for example the Ohrid Framework Agreement that brought the 2001 inter-ethnic conflict to an end in Macedonia. It would furthermore open the proverbial Pandora's box of territorial and cross border ethnic disputes across an already fragile and volatile region, and raises the fundamental question whether the international community has really understood the lessons of history.

The other development relating to bilateral disputes was the landmark agreement reached between Macedonia and Greece whereby Macedonia accepted to change its constitutional name in return for Greek support towards the country's EU and NATO aspirations, an agreement praised by the international community. Nationalist and right-wing elements in Greece have roundly condemned the agreement. In Macedonia, instead of uniting the country, the agreement has resulted in an even more fractured society, with the main opposition party, itself mired in the scandals of its time in government and unable to reform itself into a constructive political opposition, leading the campaign against the agreement. Dubious deals by the government behind the scenes, reportedly granting amnesty to individual members of the opposition party for their misdeeds during the previous government in return for their support in Parliament, have undermined the credibility of the government's commitment to the rule of law. If and when the agreement is ratified, its implementation will require a major effort in building lasting trust across the political divide in Macedonia as well as fostering reconciliation between Macedonia and Greece. The wording of the agreement makes the task

of promoting good relations between two countries who have been neighbours for centuries extra challenging.<sup>13</sup>

The EU has repeatedly stated that all bilateral disputes must be resolved prior to accession. As the Kosovo/Serbia dispute has shown, leaving the responsibility for resolving these disputes entirely to the countries concerned, will not work. It will require a more pro-active diplomatic effort on the part of the EU using its own expertise in overcoming the legacy of the past and promoting a process based on the rule of law. The Badinter Arbitration Commission established after the break-up of Yugoslavia could be a useful precedent in this respect. Even the appointment of an EU Special Representative should not be excluded.

## The year ahead

With the European Parliament elections in May and the appointment of the new leadership of the EU institutions and a new Commission in the autumn, it will be difficult to maintain any momentum in the EU's re-engagement with the Western Balkans.

The main focus, at least during the earlier part of the year, will be on preparing the European Council in June and the publication of the European Commission's Enlargement Strategy and Country Reports which should form the basis for the European Council's deliberations. This will be followed by the Berlin Process summit, the sixth in the series, this time to be hosted by Poland in Poznan in early July.

## Enlargement Strategy and Country Reports

This will be the last enlargement communication to be presented by the Juncker Commission. Despite changes introduced to make the Country Reports more user-friendly, the format and methodology have remained more or less the same over the years. They provide a useful barometer on the state of play regarding the reforms in all the areas covered by the accession process, but little more.

Their usefulness would be considerably enhanced if they were to provide a more political message and include an operational road map for each of the countries. There is, for example, no reason why the concrete actions (such as the peer review missions on rule of law issues) proposed in the February strategy paper could not be incorporated into each Country Report. This would ensure that the strategy paper remains a living document, providing a strategic direction to the accession process, and would make the country report exercise much more operational.

As for the recommendations contained in the communication, it will be important that, as a minimum, the recommendations from the previous year's exercise be repeated, particularly as regards the opening of accession negotiations with both Albania and Macedonia, assuming that

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<sup>13</sup> "Progress in Resolving the Greek-Macedonian name dispute: Will it break the Gordian knot at last?" CEPS Commentary. 18 June 2018.



both countries will have fulfilled the commitments set out in the European Council conclusions from last June. For Macedonia, these include:

- “judicial reforms and proactive investigations, prosecutions and final convictions in corruption and organised crime cases, including at high level;
- intelligence and security services reform;
- public administration reform”.<sup>14</sup>

For Albania meanwhile, the required reforms include:

- “further advancing the process of re-evaluating judges and prosecutors, in particular completing all priority dossiers, and finalising the establishment of the independent judicial structures as foreseen by the Constitutional reform;
- finalising the establishment of specialised bodies, namely the Special Anti-Corruption and Organised Crime Structure (SPAK) and National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) and Court;
- strengthening the track record of pro-active investigations, prosecutions and final convictions against corruption and organised crime, including at high level”.<sup>15</sup>

By the time of the Country Reports in April, Bosnia and Herzegovina will hopefully have completed the questionnaire exercise in its entirety. The major work has already been achieved; all that is remaining are the responses to the supplementary questions from the European Commission. That Bosnia and Herzegovina accomplished most of this task despite the deeply divided and dysfunctional nature of the government was a miracle in itself. For the Commission to adopt a positive opinion on the country’s accession application and propose the granting of candidate status would send a message of encouragement to the country.

The timing for the adoption of the enlargement communication has unfortunately become an issue this year because of the European Parliament elections scheduled for second half of May. Nervousness about influencing the mood of the electorate on enlargement is so great that there are suggestions that the Commission should wait until after the elections before adopting the communication. But this would leave virtually no time for the European Council taking place at the end of June to absorb and act upon the findings and could push back important decisions to the December European Council. The Commission should resist all attempts to delay beyond early April, i.e. two weeks before Easter. Waiting until after the elections would be abdicating the Commission’s responsibilities and further eroding its leadership role. It would also be perceived in the Western Balkan region as allowing undue space to the eurosceptic anti-enlargement lobby within the EU.

Another reason not to delay is the opportunity to influence the outcome of the informal EU summit on 9 May, hosted by Romania as holder of the Council Presidency in Sibiu. After the time and energy devoted to Brexit, which at time of writing remains inconclusive, this meeting

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<sup>14</sup> Council of the European Union; Council Conclusions, Brussels, 26 June 2018. 10555/18, page 16.

<sup>15</sup> Op.cit, page 19.

will be an opportunity for member state leaders to regroup and set out some key strategic goals for the future of the European integration process. To quote President Juncker in his 2018 State of the Union address to the European Parliament, Sibiu will be the moment “we must offer a strong perspective for the future”. Several ideas have already been put forward aimed at strengthening the EU’s capacity to act both internally and on the world stage, one of them being moving towards qualified majority voting in specific areas of external relations. Enhancing the credibility of the EU accession perspective for the Western Balkan region should form an integral part of the meeting’s conclusions. The presence of Western Balkan leaders in an observer capacity at this event would be an important gesture in this respect.

## The European Council in June

After the disappointing outcome of the 2018 June European Council, this will be a critical opportunity for the EU member states to restore credibility in the enlargement agenda and to demonstrate that their commitment to the Western Balkans is genuine. Anything less will feed into the nationalist narrative in the region and add to disillusionment, particularly for the younger generation, who will likely join countless others who have gone before them in seeking their fortune elsewhere. The events of the recent past with political instability, increased authoritarian tendencies among ruling parties and undermining of the rule of law should serve as a reminder to the EU member states of the dangers of instability in the EU’s nearest neighbourhood.

The European Council should first and foremost put to rest the sterile debate of deepening versus widening ignited by President Macron last year. It should be mindful of the fact that if it continues to prevaricate over the enlargement perspective for the Western Balkans, it does so at its peril. The ‘others’ that President Juncker spoke about in his 2018 State of the Union address are waiting in the wings to influence developments to suit their own respective agendas.

The decisions that will hopefully be taken at the European Council in June should therefore provide a clear sense of direction for the next steps in the EU’s enlargement agenda. Agreement on the formal opening of accession negotiations with both Albania and Macedonia would compensate for the momentum lost last year. Similarly, a decision to grant candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina should provide encouragement and hopefully have a positive impact on the domestic political situation in that country.

## The Berlin Process

It will be Poland’s turn to host the sixth in the series of annual summits organised under the Berlin Process, when it receives the Western Balkan leaders in Poznan during the first week of July. Launched by Chancellor Merkel in July 2014,<sup>16</sup> these summits, with their focus on regional cooperation, provided a useful boost to the interaction between the EU and the Western

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<sup>16</sup> Berlin (2014), Vienna (2015), Paris (2016), Trieste (2017), London, (2018).

Balkans, particularly at a time when the EU itself was paying less attention to the region. That said, many of the practical results from these summits, particularly as regards connectivity projects in the transport and energy sectors, have yet to see the light of day, often due to the weak administrative capacities of the Western Balkan countries or lack of coordination among them.<sup>17</sup> The Berlin Process also failed to pay sufficient attention to rule of law issues, particularly at a time when democratic standards were deteriorating dramatically and 'state capture' was gaining hold in a number of the countries across the region.

A positive factor generated by the Berlin Process was the mobilisation of civil society across the Western Balkan region and the many initiatives it put forward for consideration by the leaders present at the successive summits. It is unfortunate that the level of attention paid to these excellent initiatives varied considerably from one summit to another, and depended on the willingness of the host government to provide the necessary space for civil society dialogue with the leaders. Yet providing a space for civil society remains a crucial factor for the region, not least to ensure greater government accountability, particularly in the absence of the normal checks and balances.

As for the future of the Berlin Process, this will depend very much on the level of commitment and enhanced engagement from the EU and its member states with the Western Balkans, particularly following the European Parliament elections.

If the EU's commitment gains momentum, there is no reason why the Berlin Process cannot become absorbed into the EU enlargement and accession process itself.<sup>18</sup> However, should the EU's commitment remain uncertain, then it will be important for the Berlin Process to continue. In an ideal world, and the current Kosovo/Serbia stand-off notwithstanding, it could even be transformed into one 'owned' and managed by the region itself, with EU encouragement and involvement. Self-ownership of the connectivity agenda could work to boost regional cooperation, with greater focus on societal issues such as reconciliation, education and culture. There was much disappointment that the London summit made no reference to the importance of reconciliation, despite efforts from civil society organisations to have it on the agenda. Until such time as the region comes to terms with the past, reduces the list of missing persons, pursues transitional justice and forges true reconciliation, the long term stability of the region will remain an elusive dream. Another neglected area is the environment, where management of natural resources would greatly benefit from more concerted regional cooperation.

## The new Commission

A common complaint from the Western Balkans has been the lack of EU visibility and high profile presence across a region destined to become an integral part of the Union. When the High Representative visited in March 2017, this was her first visit to some of the countries since

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<sup>17</sup> Matteo Bonomi, Balkan Reflection Forum; 22 October, 2018

<sup>18</sup> "The 'Berlin Process' for the Western Balkans – Is it delivering?" Steven Blockmans, Erwan Fouéré, CEPS commentary, 13 July, 2017.

assuming her mandate in 2014. High profile visits should not be limited to times of crises. Greater and more regular attention to the region at the political level would bring dividends in the long term, and would give the region confidence in the level of EU commitment.

The new Commission should show determination in regaining its political leadership over the enlargement agenda from the outset. For example, the new Commission President in his or her statements on assuming the mandate should include a direct reference to the Western Balkans and to the strength of the EU's commitment to the region.

The Commission should return to the old system and appoint a Commissioner responsible exclusively for the enlargement portfolio. The Mission letter from the new President to the newly appointed Commissioner should include clear references to the February Strategy Paper and the determination to pursue a policy to prepare the Western Balkan countries for future membership. Together with a more active involvement of the new High Representative, this would set the tone for a more consistent and more visible approach towards the region.

The joint efforts of both the Commission and the EEAS should be used in particular to promote a more active role in resolving ongoing bilateral disputes, using the EU's technical and legal expertise. This is after all where the conflict resolution goals mentioned in the EU's Global Security Strategy should be brought into play in a meaningful way, rather than leaving the responsibility for resolving the disputes entirely to the countries concerned.

The mechanisms for monitoring implementation of reforms that are mentioned in the February Strategy Paper, such as case-based peer reviews by Commission and member states experts in the areas of rule of law and the fight against corruption, should be a top priority for the new Commission. The more intrusive the scrutiny of the reform record of the Western Balkan countries the better will be the quality of those reforms in the long run. The phenomenon of 'state capture' was as much a failure of the Western Balkan countries to deliver on their reform commitments, as it was of the EU to have allowed it to happen.

The new Commission should also move away from the elite-driven accession process which has privileged the entrenched ruling elites over the broader spectrum of society. With many of the countries in the region still in a post-conflict environment, civil society actors at both national and local community level should be viewed as an integral part of the process, rather than just a pro forma box to tick. This is the only way to achieve a badly needed political and societal transformation throughout the region.

Perhaps the greatest challenge will be in striving to prepare the countries for the day when they will eventually become member states. They should be given the opportunity to contribute to the debates on the EU's long term future through inclusion of the Western Balkans in Informal European Councils, and regular inter-ministerial meetings in areas such as employment, social reforms and environment, as proposed by the February Strategy Paper. In addition, allowing access to the structural and cohesion funds should be pursued. The more these EU aspiring countries are involved in the day-to-day workings of the EU integration process, the better prepared they will become. It would also provide an incentive to those

countries to depoliticise their respective public administrations and ensure continuity in their involvement in EU structures.

The new Commission should be ambitious in its forward-looking approach and ensure that the commitment of member states towards the EU's enlargement agenda remains foremost. As underlined in the February 2018 Strategy Paper, "the EU's enlargement policy must be part and parcel of the larger strategy to strengthen the Union by 2025". This would hopefully guarantee that the next EU/Western Balkan summit to be hosted by Croatia in 2020 will confirm a new historic chapter, which could set the stage for having formal accession negotiations opened with all six Western Balkan countries during the mandate of the new Commission.

## Conclusion

As the European Union moves on from the all-consuming debate over Brexit, it will be faced with some critical choices on the future direction it wishes to take. It could follow the inward-looking path that would mean relinquishing a leadership role on the world stage at a time when it is most needed.

Or it could return to the spirit of openness and generosity that characterised the European integration process in the past. By reaffirming its commitment to the integration of the Western Balkan region, and making the accession process irreversible, the EU will strengthen its capacity to transform the political process in these countries as they prepare to become part of the EU family of nations.