New Perspectives for the Western Balkans

ECR GROUP
EUROPEAN CONSERVATIVES AND REFORMISTS

Foreword by Angel Dzhambazki, Chair of the ECR Western Balkans Working Group

In the first decade of the 21st century, 14 countries from Central and Eastern Europe joined the European Union. In 2013, Croatia was the first country from the Western Balkans to join the Union.

The enlargement of the European Union is proceeding with varying intensity, but the most active are the integration policies of the Western Balkans countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia). Every one of these countries has its own characteristics - cultural, ethnic and political. Moreover, many Western Balkan nations face lingering struggles from the past, stemming from the wars that followed the collapse of Yugoslavia. One thing, which has to be emphasised, is that EU accession is impossible without due condemnation of the former authoritarian regimes, which gripped the region until the last decade of the 20th century. Every other country in Eastern Europe that was bound by the iron grip of communism has done so. This standard must not change. Praising former totalitarian and communist regimes is incompatible with EU membership.

In this publication, we will outline the specifics of the EU Accession Process and we will try to give a clear picture of the Western Balkans, of the problems in the region and the necessary reforms each country must adopt on their path to EU membership. Finally, we will try to outline our common future goals and the obstacles to achieving them.

The Western Balkans are an integral part of Europe. Still, to become a true member of our community, they must free themselves from harmful dependencies and undertake many reforms. On the other hand, we must assess and consider the specifics of the region and propose reasonable solutions for its development. Naturally, we have to consider the influence third countries have on the region. There is increasing pressure from countries such as the Russian Federation, Turkey and even China, who use proxies in the region to promote their own interests and distort the region's path to the EU. As a group, the ECR must make every political effort to counter these malicious influences, which take many forms - from benevolent help to aggressive provocations against the EU.

In the ECR Group, we support the accession process, but not at all costs. Countries aspiring to become Members of the European Union need to know that joining the club comes with strict responsibilities and requirements. Membership of the Union does not create miracles that solve problems and hardships, but the accession process is designed to overcome these difficulties and prepare the countries for membership.

Furthermore, while the EU has to provide a clear path for accession, one thing must be explicitly stated: there are already many internal issues in the Union. It would be hazardous for the resilience of the EU as an entity to import new open matters between member states. It is our expectation that bilateral issues are settled before accession. Hence, we strongly advocate for an accession process based on each country's own merits, and I firmly believe our partners in the Western Balkans will work hard to join us in our Union of nations and states.

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

Angel Dzhambazki,
Chair of the ECR Western Balkans Working Group.
– ECR Chief Whip and Co-Treasurer, Member of the ECR Bureau, Bulgarian Delegation Leader



Anna Fotyga,
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Foreword by Anna Fotyga, ECR Group Coordinator in AFET Committee

My region, Central and Eastern Europe, shares the same historical experience as the Western Balkans. The richness of cultures, the great wealth of the region's unique heritage, and the painful experience of invasions, suppression and exploitation by powerful neighbours. We all remember the wars tearing apart the Western Balkans, devastating local communities, harming entire societies, bringing distrust between nations and ethnicities, but also creating negative spill-over effects for the European Union.

Yes, it takes years to break away from the economic and social collapse of the communist past. But it's the most appropriate time to do so, to break with the Yalta legacy. The ECR Group has been a strong promoter of the necessity to reunite the continent. The Western Balkans are truly a part of Europe, not only in the geographical sense. The European Union has a tailored approach for cooperation with its neighbours, namely the Stabilisation and Association Agreements (SAA) that are concluded with each country. With the Western Balkans, this cooperation has moved a step further because these countries are aspiring to become Member States of the EU, which will ultimately make the region more stable, more secure and more prosperous.

However, the accession to the European Union is not a "magica wand" that will solve the problems in the region. The European Union provides guidance, financial support and some tools. In turn, the countries need to work hard and perform vigorous reform processes, which will enable the transformation towards becoming prosperous and stable societies, thus improving regional stability and their alignment with the EU Member States. Hence, the ECR Group strongly advocates that the accession process be based on a country-by-country approach as the quality and speed of the process depends solely on the merit and speed of reforms in each country. Moreover, most of the Western Balkan's countries are already allies within NATO. Such cooperation should naturally be deepened in an economic and political format with successful enlargement of the European Union.

It is also important to limit foreign interference in the Western Balkans coming from Russia, China and Turkey as this jeopardises the accession negotiations with the European Union. The European Union cannot accept "Trojan horses" in its family. The Western Balkans' nations should be aware of the lessons of the past and ensure that external actors cannot destroy their future by reheating conflicts and destabilising their societies. From my experience in the European Parliament, I can tell you that the Members of the European Parliament from neighbouring states are my closest allies in the house. I am sure that Western Balkan's politicians will also share the same perspective on many topics and work closely together in a united, coherent way, expressing solidarity in addressing common challenges.

Recently, the European Parliament adopted the accession progress reports from the countries from the Western Balkans. The ECR Group has always contributed to these annual reports with amendments, active negotiations and constructive discussions. Further in this publication, our Shadow Rapporteurs on the progress reports will outline their key positions towards each country in the Western Balkans. ress reports will outline their key positions towards each country in the Western Balkans.

Shadow Rapporteurs of candidate / potential candidate countries





Lars Patrick Berg – ECR Group Shadow Rapporteur on Albania





Assita Kanko – ECR Group Shadow Rapporteur on Bosnia and Herzegovina



Zdzisław Krasnodębski – ECR Group Shadow Rapporteur on Montenegro and Serbia



Angel Dzhambazki – ECR Group Shadow Rapporteur on North Macedonia and Kosovo

Introduction

The countries associated with the term “Western Balkans”, i.e. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Kosovo, are widely acknowledged as the next batch for EU enlargement. The mass enlargement of 2004 and the subsequent ones of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007 and Croatia in 2013 cooled off aspirations within the Union for further rapid enlargement. Despite the fact that the Western Balkans has long been on the agenda for the European Union, integration of the region has been slow and burdensome.

The ECR Group and its Western Balkans Policy Group have been engaged in topics related to the Western Balkans by issuing reports and organising conferences. The ECR Group deems it essential to increase the public’s awareness of the importance of the Western Balkans and their future membership to the EU.

The Western Balkan countries, geopolitically and historically, belong to Europe, and their accession to the European Union is a natural process that will unite Europe and make the Union complete.



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EU Enlargement - Enhancing the Accession Process

EU Enlargement can be best described as a “learning by doing” process. The core accession criteria defined by the European Council in Copenhagen in 1993 (hence the Copenhagen criteria) are the essential conditions that all candidate countries must satisfy to become EU Member State. However, since the mass enlargement in 2004 and the subsequent ones of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007 and Croatia in 2013, the EU Enlargement Policy has undergone significant changes.

The Accession (Copenhagen) criteria:

– **political criteria:** stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities;

– **economic criteria:** a functioning market economy and the capacity to cope with competition and market forces;

– **administrative and institutional capacity** to effectively implemen the acquis and ability to take on the obligations of membership.

In 2015, the European Commission introduced an entirely new methodology to make the process more transparent and better assess and compare the progress made by the accession countries. For the firs time, the Commission introduced the principle “fundamentals first” that define as key priorities the rule law, fundamental rights, strengthening democratic institutions and public administration reform, as well as economic development and competitiveness. These “fundamentals” are the key benchmark against which the EU will judge each country’s prospects. Finally, each country will be assessed on its own merits.

The 2018 European Commission strategy “A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans” reaffirmed the European future of the estern Balkans countries. The strategy also introduced further changes to the EU Enlargement Process by defining 57 speci commitments grouped in six flagship initiatives: (1) strengthening the rule of law; (2) reinforcing engag - ment on security and migration; (3) enhancing support for socio-economic development;

(4) increasing transport and energy connectivity; (5) digital agenda for the Western Balkans; (6) supporting reconciliation and good neighbourly relations. The Members States and the Western Balkans partners endorsed the new EU Enlargement Strategy through the Sofia Priority Agenda, adopted at the estern Balkans Summit in Sofia on 17 May 2018

Six candidate/potential candidate countries from the Western Balkans:

– **Albania** (accession negotiation started in 2020)
– **Bosnia and Herzegovina** (application to join the EU submitted in February 2016)
– **Montenegro** (accession negotiation started in 2012)
– **North Macedonia** (accession negotiation started in 2020)
– **Serbia** (accession negotiation started in 2014)
– **Kosovo*** (Stabilisation and Association Agreement entered into force in April 2016)

Towards a merit-based accession process

Following the European Council conclusions in November 2019, there was a common understanding of the usefulness of examining the effectiveness of the accession negotiation process. As a result, in Fe - ruary 2020, in its communication entitled "Enhancing the accession process - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans", the European Commission presented a revised methodology to drive forward the enlargement process with a stronger political steer and in a more credible, predictable and dynamic way.

To strengthen the political steer, the European Commission plans to increase the high level political and policy dialogue opportunities through regular EU-Western Balkans summits and intensified ministeria contacts. Furthermore, Member States will be invited to contribute more systematically to the accession process. In contrast, the European Commission will propose in its annual enlargement package the way ahead for the following year, including proposals for corrective measures.

The European Commission plans to reinforce the credibility of the accession process through an even stronger focus on the fundamental reforms, which will become even more central in the accession ne- gotiations. Negotiations on the fundamentals will be opened first and closed last. The progress on thes will determine the overall pace of negotiations, i.e. no other chapter will be provisionally closed before the benchmarks on the fundamentals are met. A roadmap will guide negotiations on the fundamentals for the rule of law chapters, with another roadmap paving the way for the functioning of democratic insti- tutions and public administration reform, forging a stronger link with the economic reform programme process to help the countries meet the economic criteria.

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In order to make the process more dynamic, the negotiating chapters will be organised in thematic clusters: (1) Fundamentals, (2) Internal Market, (3) Competitiveness and inclusive growth, (4) Green agenda and sustainable connectivity, (5) Resources, agriculture and cohesion, (6) External relations. Clustering chapters will allow a stronger focus on core sectors in the political dialogue and the most important and urgent reforms per sector to be identified. Negotiations on each cluster will be opened as a whole - afte fulfilling the opening benchmarks - rather than on an individual chapter basis as befor . Upon opening a cluster, closing benchmarks are set for each chapter.

Clusters of negotiating chapters:

1. Fundamentals	23 – Judiciary and fundamental rights 24 – Justice, Freedom and Security Economic criteria Functioning of democratic institutions Public administration reform 5 – Public procurement 18 – Statistics 32 – Financial control
2. Internal Market	1 – Free movement of goods 2 – Freedom of movement for workers 3 – Right of establishment and freedom to provide services 4 – Free movement of capital 6 – Company law 7 – Intellectual property law 8 – Competition policy 9 – Financial services 28 – Consumer and health protection
3. Competitiveness and inclusive growth	10 – Information society and media 16 – Taxation 17 – Economic and monetary policy 19 – Social policy and employment 20 – Enterprise and industrial policy 25 – Science and research 26 – Education and culture 29 – Customs union
4. Green agenda and sustainable connectivity	14 - Transport policy 15 - Energy 21 - Trans-European networks 27 - Environment and climate change

Clusters of negotiating chapters:

5. Resources, agriculture and cohesion	11 – Agriculture and rural development 12 – Food safety, veterinary and phytosanitary policy 13 – Fisheries 22 – Regional policy & coordination of structural instruments 33 – Financial & budgetary provisions
6. External relations	30 - External relations 31 - Foreign, security & defence policy

Chapter 34 "Institutions" and **Chapter 35** "Other issues" will be handled separately.

Both Member States and the Western Balkans countries have called for a more predictable process, which ensures greater clarity on what the European Union expects of enlargement countries at different stages of the process. The European Commission will use the enlargement package to check the candidate's compliance with the EU acquis and provide more precise guidance on specific reform priorities and alignment criteria as well as expectations for the next steps in the process.

The groundbreaking core element of the merit-based accession process is the introduction of positive and negative conditionality. The European Commission will define the conditions set for candidates to progress. If countries move on reform priorities agreed in the negotiations, this will allow for closer integration of the country with the European Union, "phasing-in" to individual EU policies, the EU market and EU programmes. In addition, the country will receive increased funding and investments. On the other hand, if any serious or prolonged stagnation or even backsliding is identified, a proportionate measure will be taken. The Member States could decide to put negotiations on hold in certain areas or suspend them entirely. Furthermore, already closed chapters could be re-opened or reset if issues need to be reassessed. The scope and intensity of EU funding could be adjusted downward, and benefits of closer integration (access to EU programmes, unilateral concessions for market access) could be paused or withdrawn.

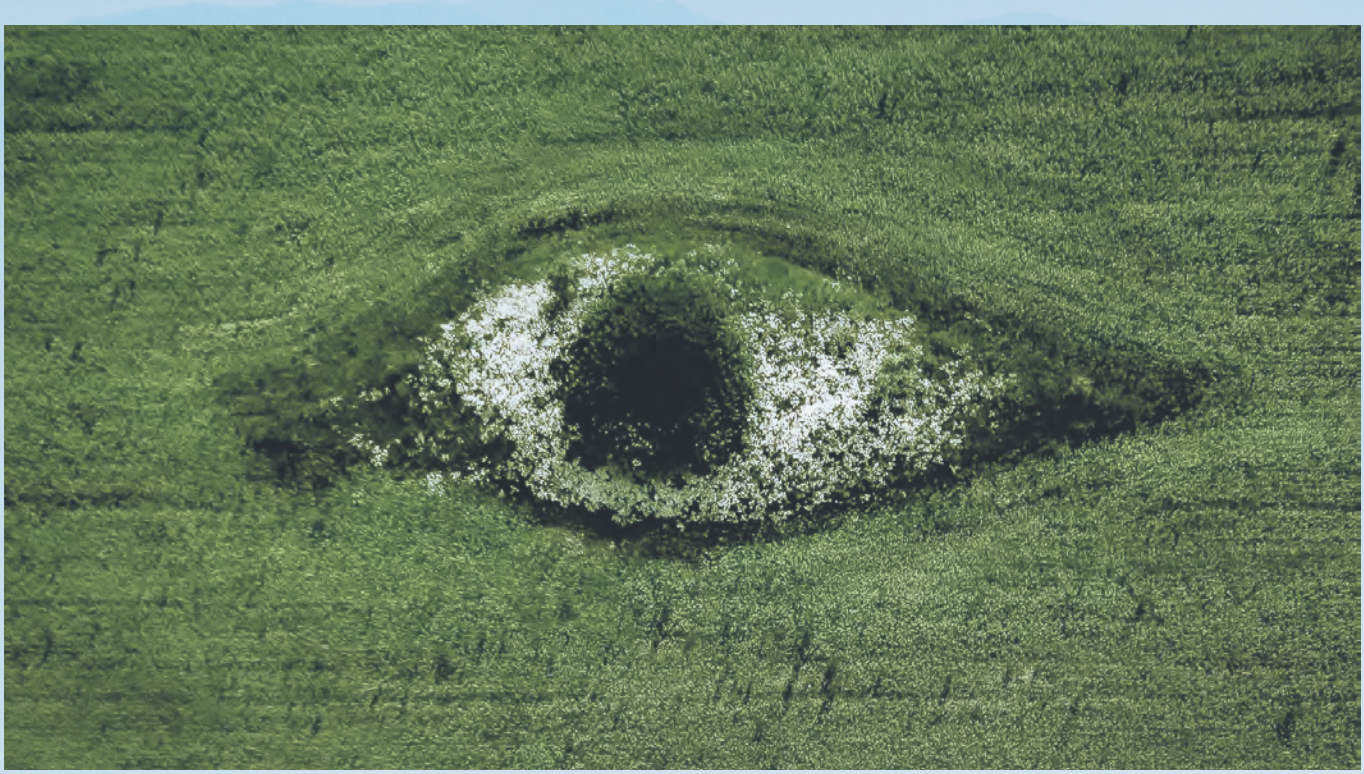
EU Accession Process step by step:

1. Country submits its application for Membership to the Council of the European Union.
2. The European Commission submits an Opinion on the application.
3. EU Member States decide unanimously to grant the country candidate status.
4. After conditions are met, the accession negotiations are opened with the agreement of all Member States.
5. The European Commission proposes a draft negotiating framework as a basis for the talks, which then needs to be agreed upon by the Member States.
6. During negotiations, the country prepares to implement EU laws and standards. All EU Members States must agree the country has met all the requirements.

7. Once negotiations on all areas are finalised, the European Commission gives its Opinion on th readiness of the country to become a Member State.
8. Based on this Opinion, EU Member States decide unanimously to close the negotiation process. The European Parliament must also give its consent.
9. All EU Member States and the candidate country sign and ratify an Accession Treaty, which enables the country to become an EU Member State.

Priority areas for ECR, where the EU should make a special effort and assist the Western Balkans accession countries.

1. Security and migration:
– limiting Russian influence and addressing disinformation campaigns in the estern Balkans;
– promoting NATO activities in the region;
– countering terrorism threat and radicalisation;
– cooperating with neighbours, EU Member States, and with the European Border and Coast Guard Agency to effectively manage migration flow
– Enhancing cyber security capabilities in the region and ensuring trusted vendors for 5G and other incoming new technologies;



2. Economic and social development:
- expanding infrastructure and energy transport corridors to stimulate regional development, trade and people-to-people contacts;
- ensuring fair competition and strengthening the rule of law to stimulate growth and development of the private sector;
- reducing internal migration and brain drain to Western Europe through economic development;

3. Rule of law, fight against corruption and organised crime:
- ensuring the independence of the judiciary through limiting the political;
- fighting prevailing corruption and increasing the number of final court rulings on high-level corrupti cases;
- improving the track record on investigations, prosecutions and convictions in the fight against organise crime;

4. Good neighbourly relations
- resolving bilateral issues before the start of the accession negotiations in order to avoid blockage at a later stage;
- guaranteeing the rights and freedoms of national minorities to maintain good neighbourly relations;
- increasing cross-border cooperation and good neighbourly relations to bring investment and growth to the often forgotten and underdeveloped border regions;



The 2020 Enlargement Package

On 19 October 2021, at an extraordinary meeting of the European Parliament Committee on Foreign Affairs, the Commissioner for European Neighbourhood and Enlargement, Olivér Várhelyi, presented the 2021 Enlargement Package. The 2021 Enlargement Package takes stock of developments since the last Enlargement Package 2020 that reflected the changes and the enhanced approach to the accession process to be more merit-based. It examines the progress made by the Western Balkans, the challenges encountered and reforms to be addressed. The progress reports also set out conclusions and recommendations for the period ahead. The reports clearly outline the state of fundamental reforms and provide comparative overviews of the performance among the accession countries.

The reporting period marks some significant developments in the accession process of the Western Balkans, notably Montenegro and Serbia agreeing to apply the revised methodology of 2020 at the first political intergovernmental conferences under the revised methodology held with these countries on 22 June 2021. Pending bilateral issues between Bulgaria and North Macedonia need to be resolved as a matter of priority in order to allow the negotiating frameworks with North Macedonia and Albania to be adopted and the official accession negotiations launched. Concerning Bosnia and Herzegovina, the European Commission has provided a comprehensive roadmap for reforms and 14 key priorities the country needs to fulfil in order for the European Commission to recommend opening EU accession negotiations. With regards to Kosovo, the European Commission maintains its assessment that all criteria set by the Council for visa liberalisation with Kosovo have been fulfilled, however, the decision to lift visa requirements for Kosovo citizens is still pending in the European Council.

ALBANIA

The Commission's 2021 report on Albania, as part of the Enlargement package, concludes that overall, and despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, Albania has continued to show its commitment to EU oriented reforms and delivered tangible and sustainable results. General elections held on 25 April 2021, following a wide-ranging electoral reform, were generally well organised, according to international observers. With regard to EU oriented reforms, the Albanian Parliament adopted a number of significant pieces of legislation, in areas such as asylum, the population census, and the efficiency of the judiciary. Albania is moderately prepared in the reform of its public administration. Albania's judicial system is moderately prepared, as it has continued to implement the comprehensive justice reform, resulting in good progress. The temporary re-evaluation of all judges and prosecutors (vetting process) has advanced steadily, continuing to produce tangible results. Albania has some level of preparation in the fight against corruption and organised Crime, having made good progress, but challenges remain. On fundamental rights, Albania complies with international human rights instruments and has developed its legal framework in line with European standards, but the overall implementation remains to be strengthened. As regards the economic criteria, Albania has made some progress regarding the economic criteria and is moderately prepared in developing a functioning market economy.

Lars Patrick Berg (ECR Shadow Rapporteur): Albania continues to deliver significant progress in the areas of rule of law, election regulations, prevention of organised crime, reform of the judiciary and the status of constitutional and supreme courts. Of particular note is the success with which Albania has aligned its foreign policy with that of the European Union, which in the current climate is of major importance to the stability of Europe and, more specifically, the Western Balkans. There still remains a deficit in terms of freedom of expression, and attitudes towards media, but there can be no doubt that Albania has made significant strides in meeting accession criteria"

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BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

The ECR Group believes that reforms in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) are much needed. BiH is expected to address 14 key priorities from the Commission's Opinion on its EU membership application, with only some steps taken so far. Last year we witnessed several disruptive activities, especially by Milorad Dodik, the Serbian member of BiH's three man presidency. The situation needs to be de-escalated. Despite numerous efforts, the necessary electoral reforms still have not been adopted. Concerning the other political criteria, no progress was made on public administration reform, the judiciary, and the prevention and fight against corruption and organised crime. On fundamental rights, a comprehensive strategic framework remains to be adopted. Concerning economic criteria, BiH is at an early stage of establishing a functioning market economy and needs to significantly step up the process to align with the EU acquis and implement and enforce related legislation.

Assita Kanko (ECR Shadow Rapporteur): BiH is a nation on a journey. A nation recovering from a difficult past, pursuing reforms and a reshaped future. However, that journey of reform remains slow. There is still a long way to go before BiH aligns its values, legal framework and economy with the EU. There is a large hill to climb before the opportunity to pursue EU membership becomes a reality. So far, there has been limited progress in creating a functioning market economy, providing greater transparency of political financing, and ensuring a judicial framework that can prevent organised crime and corruption and fight terrorism. While the EU has provided considerable support to BiH to manage migration, there remains significant concern that BiH is not taking the necessary steps to ensure border management and humanitarian standards. Nonetheless, reforms have to be driven by BiH itself. It is not up to the EU to impose a model. That journey must be one of self-determination and internal agreement within the former Yugoslavian nations themselves. As agreed in the Dayton Peace Agreement, the 'constituent peoples concept' in BiH is an important one. Coming from Belgium, a country that has been reforming its own state structure for almost 200 years, I understand that achieving fundamental and meaningful reforms can take generations. I hope BiH continues on a journey that leads to lasting peace and prosperity.



MONTENEGRO

Montenegro is the most advanced Western Balkan country in the accession negotiations, having opened all the chapters of the EU's acquis, and has provisionally closed negotiations on some of them. Montenegro has also been a Member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation since June 2017. Internally, the country is making good progress on reforms, including the fight against organised crime, public administration reform, reinforcing the stability of the financial sector and improvements to labour market condition. However, some areas still need substantial changes - especially countering corruption and ensuring media freedom and freedom of expression. In foreign relations, Montenegro is committed to inclusive regional cooperation, and plays a constructive role in the Western Balkans region, actively participating in numerous regional initiatives. It has also fully aligned itself with the EU's common foreign and security policy, also taking part in CSDP missions and international police cooperation. For these reasons, Montenegro has been subject to Russian disinformation campaigns aiming at destabilising the country.

Zdzisław Krasnodębski (ECR Rapporteur): With three negotiating chapters closed and all the others now opened, Montenegro is the most advanced Western Balkan state in its accession negotiations with the EU. The country has reached a good level of preparation in areas such as company law, energy, and security and defence policy. It is moderately prepared in many other chapters, such as free movement of goods, agriculture, rural development or food safety. The first political transition in 30 years that took place after the elections in 2020 turned out not to be completely successful. The main challenges that the new minority government will have to face now are mainly related to judiciary reform, freedom of expression, and fighting against corruption and organised crime. In order to show its support for the European integration of the Western Balkans, I am of the opinion that the EU should nevertheless acknowledge Montenegro's efforts made in those fields. In the context of growing tensions in the Balkans region following the Russian aggression on Ukraine, we, as the EU, should show more good will and solidarity to make Montenegro's accession to the EU as quick as possible.



NORTH MACEDONIA

This year's report on the progress of the Republic of North Macedonia highlights the encouraging progress made over the last year. 2021 saw the Republic of North Macedonia successfully cope with the fallout from COVID-19, enhance digitisation throughout the country, increase youth employment, progress in its anti-corruption and counter-trafficking plans and elevate their cooperation with key security actors such as Europol, Frontex and NATO, creating a series of positive security sector reforms and further advancement on its path to Euro-Atlantic integration. The country has successfully resolved its ethnic conflict that erupted in 2001. Despite a long period of stagnation, it is largely considered to be back on track in the EU accession process. However, there remains an extremely divided political scene, preventing much needed internal reforms from taking place. Moreover, the Republic of North Macedonia's compliance with its Treaty on Friendship, Good Neighbourly Relations and Cooperation between Bulgaria and North Macedonia is increasingly called into question as outstanding issues on the shared history and common culture of the two countries is increasingly leading to widespread anti-Bulgarian sentiment, and discrimination against its Bulgarian minority. This unfortunate occurrence resulted in a stalling of EU accession talks that still remain to be resolved. ECR supports the resolution of this dispute and urges North Macedonia to return to compliance with its international treaties and resolve its bilateral disputes to further advance on its Euro-Atlantic path.

Angel Dzhambazki (ECR Shadow Rapporteur): The future of the Republic of North Macedonia undoubtedly is as a part of the EU. Given the volatility in the region caused by the war in Ukraine and the fact that foreign powers are scrambling to increase their influence in the region, it is clear that the whole region belongs to the EU. However, precisely because of the sake of unity, the EU cannot import unresolved bilateral conflicts. Any and all outstanding issues with the neighbouring countries should be resolved in good faith in order to have a chance for a successful integration process. This was also my position as a shadow rapporteur on the progress report for North Macedonia. Continued dialogue and concrete measures to overcome our differences are critical for both Bulgaria and North Macedonia.



SERBIA

The progress on various negotiating chapters has been rather slow in recent years and Serbia is only moderately prepared for EU accession in many fields. Nevertheless, in December 2021 Serbia opened cluster four of the accession negotiations that deals with the Green Agenda and sustainable connectivity. The draft EP report on the 2021 Commission report on Serbia reiterates that the progress on the rule of law and fundamental rights chapters, as well as on the normalisation of Serbia's relations with Kosovo, will determine the pace of accession. On 3 April 2022, Serbia held presidential and parliamentary elections in an environment overshadowed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and against the background of citizens' protests related to environmental issues. The Inter-Party Dialogue process between the government and the opposition, mediated by the European Parliament, resulted in the adoption of a number of measures to improve the electoral process. The previous parliamentary elections in Serbia took place in June 2020 when many of the opposition parties boycotted the elections. In a statement after the elections, the European Parliament welcomed the increased voter turnout and the return to a more pluralistic Parliament in Serbia. The European Parliament draft report regrets the fact that Serbia has not aligned with EU sanctions following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and calls on the newly elected authorities to show real commitment to EU values and to align with the EU's decisions and positions in foreign and security policy, including sanctions against Russia. It also reiterates its concern about Serbia's growing dependence on Chinese investments. The 2021 Commission report on Serbia notes that the country continued to significantly help manage the migration flows towards the EU by playing an active and constructive role and cooperating effectively with its neighbours and EU Member States.

Zdzisław Krasnodębski (ECR Shadow Rapporteur): The country's reaction to the Russian aggression against Ukraine has perplexed us, to say the least. Serbia is clearly at the crossroads between the EU and Russia, and it will ultimately have to choose its camp. We cannot allow an overtly pro-Russian state to join the Union. In the past, the country demonstrated its commitment to European cooperation through a constructive contribution to the management of migration flows through the Balkan route, among other things. We all know that the progress on various negotiating chapters has been rather slow in recent years, but these problems, in my view, can be overcome in the coming years only if Serbia itself decides that its future lays within the EU. I still believe this path should remain open.



KOSOVO*

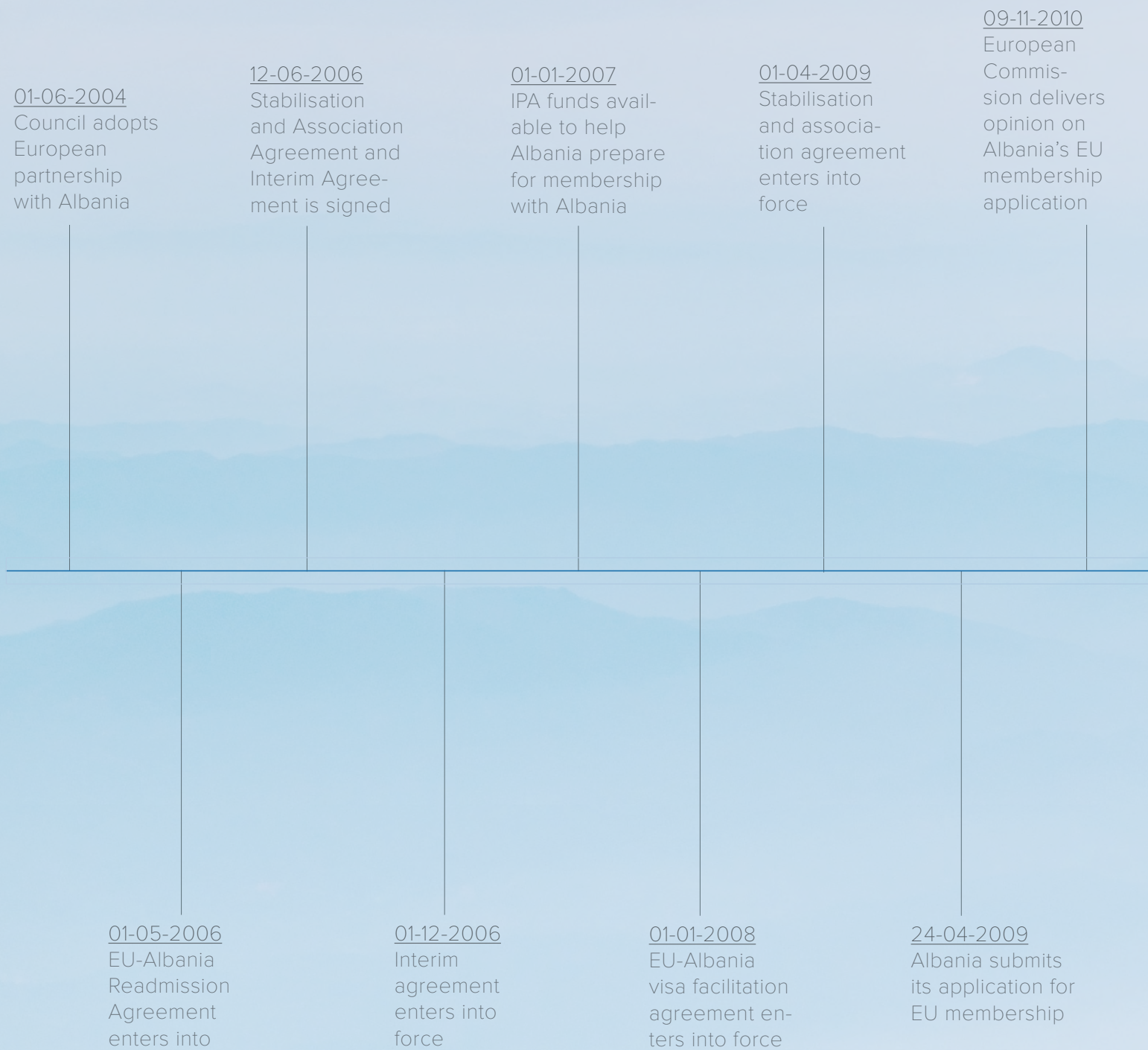
The 2021 Kosovo report outlines the progress in the areas of the rule of law, fight against organised crime and the commitment of Kosovo to advance on EU-related reforms and the overwhelming public support for European integration. Kosovo has not yet received visa liberalisation despite the positive assessment from the European Commission and the support from the European Parliament. The 2021 Kosovo report calls on the Council to proceed urgently with the adoption of a visa-free regime for the citizens of Kosovo. Regarding the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, there have been difficulties related to the actions of the Kosovo authorities on the territory of northern Kosovo and especially in the Kosovo-Serb municipalities. The Parliament regrets the decision of the Government of Kosovo to reject a proposal enabling the collection of the ballots of eligible voters to allow them to vote in the territory of Kosovo in the 3 April 2022 Serbian elections. Reaching a comprehensive and legally binding agreement between Serbia and Kosovo is crucial for the two countries to advance their respective European paths.

Angel Dzhambazki (ECR Shadow Rapporteur): The new government in Kosovo has made efforts to deliver the promises given to the people before the elections in March 2021. In particular, we have to mention the measures against corruption. I welcome the fact that the 2021 Kosovo report outlines the progress in the areas of the rule of law, fight against organised crime and the commitment of Kosovo to advance on EU-related reforms and the overwhelming public support for European integration. That being said, it is indeed regrettable that Kosovo is yet to receive clearance for visa liberalisation despite fulfilling the formal requirements. My main worries, however, are related to the fact that Serbia has not ceased the attempts to interfere in Kosovo's internal affairs. Furthermore, there are clear signals coming from Serbia, which suggest that the country might feel emboldened by the invasion of Russia in Ukraine and use the moment to use military force in Kosovo. While this is still just a remote possibility, this foreign policy of Serbia is detrimental to the security in the Western Balkans. We must remember that the wounds of war have not healed, and the EU must support countries such as Kosovo in defending their sovereignty against outside influence.



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Timeline of the accession process of **candidate / potential candidate countries**



ALBANIA



01-02-2011
An action plan addressing the 12 key priorities identified in the Eur - pean Commission opinion is adopted by Albania

12-11-2013
The EU and Albania hold the first meeting o the High Level Dialogue on Key Priorities

01-04-2018
The Commission repeats its unconditional recommendation to open accession negotiations

25-03-2020
The Council decides to open accession negotiations

01-05-21
Commission informs Council that Albania has met the remaining condition to be fulfilled prior to the holding of the first Inter-Governmental Conference of accession negotiations

15-12-2010
Visa free regime for Schengen area introduced for all Albanian citizens having a biometric passport

10-10-2012
European Commission recommends that Albania be granted EU candidate status, subject to completion of key measures in certain areas

27-06-2014
The Council granted the candidate status to Albania in June 2014

01-06-2018
The Council sets out the path towards opening accession negotiations

01-07-2020
Presentation of the draft negotiating framework to the Member States

01-10-2021
Commission confirms that Albania continues to fulfil the conditions to open accession negotiations and looks forward to the holding of the first Intergovernmental Conference as soon as possible

Timeline of the accession process of **candidate / potential candidate countries**



BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA



27-05-2010
Commission adopts proposal allowing citizens of Albania & Bosnia and Herzegovina to travel to Schengen countries without a short-term visa

01-09-2011
Delegation of the European Union and Office of t EU Special Representative become one reinforced EU presence

01-06-2015
The SAA with Bosnia and Herzegovina enters into force

20-09-2016
EU Council invites the Commission to present an Opinion on BiH application

01-12-2019
The EU Council adopts conclusions on the Commission's Opinion, endorsing the 14 key priorities therein as the conditions for Bosnia and Herzegovina to fulfil in order to be recommended for the opening of accession negotiations

15-12-2010
Visa free regime for Schengen area introduced for all Albanian citizens having a biometric passport

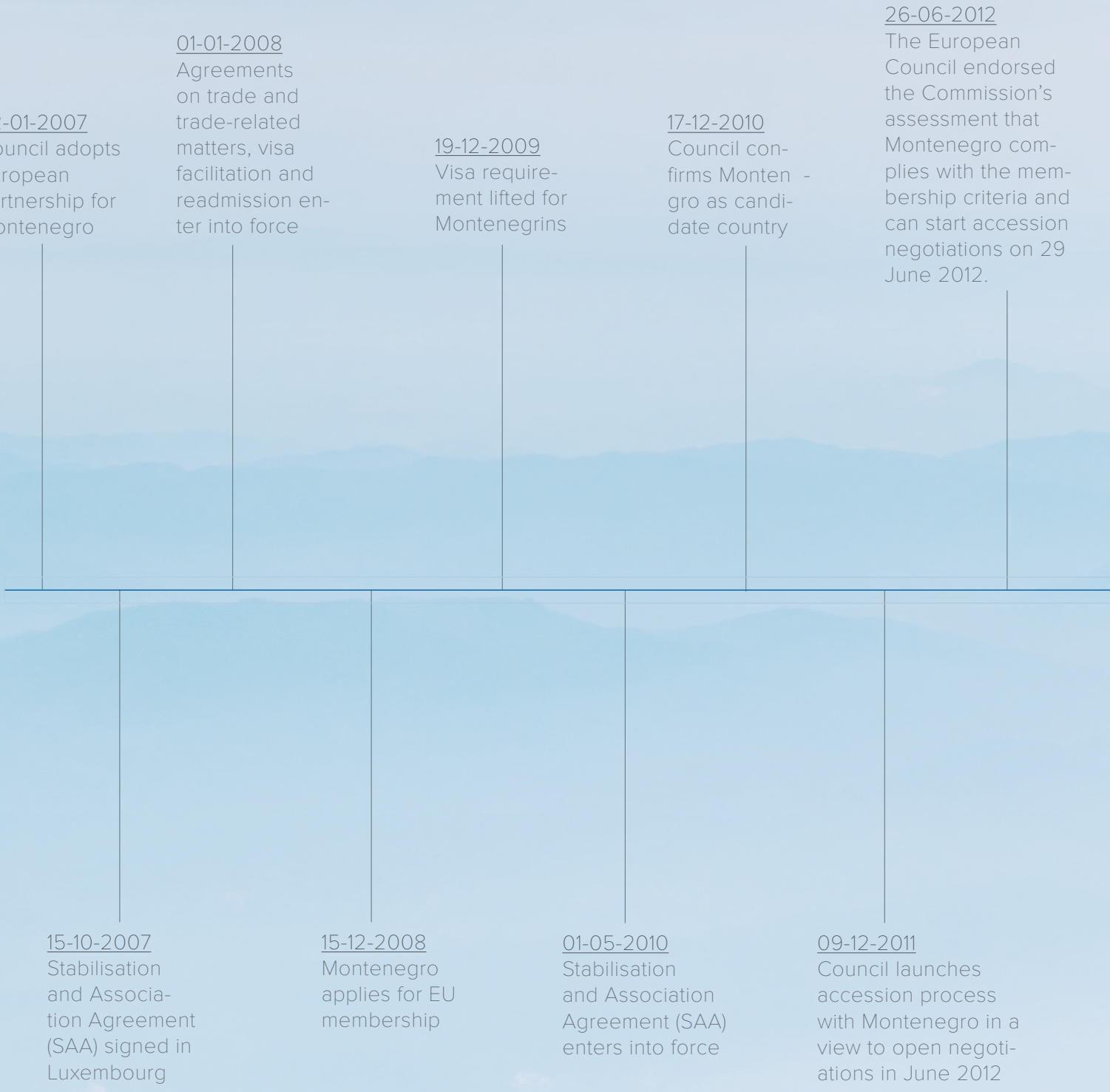
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Visa free regime for Schengen area introduced for all BiH citizens having a biometric passport

27-06-2012
The EU and Bosnia and Herzegovina launched the High Level Dialogue on the Accession Process

15-02-2016
BiH submits its application to join the EU

29-05-2019
The Commission adopts its Opinion on the EU membership application of BiH

Timeline of the accession process of **candidate / potential candidate countries**



MONTENEGRO



18-12-2012
Accession conference - First chapter provisionally closed (Science and Research)

29-06-2012
Accession negotiations with Montenegro started on 29 June 2012.

18-12-2013
Opening of rule of law Chapters: Chapter 23 – Judiciary and fundamental rights and Chapter 24 – Justice, freedom and security. Negotiations are opened on Chapter 5: Public procurement, Chapter 6: Company law and Chapter 20: Enterprise and industrial policy.

31-03-2014
Negotiations are opened on Chapters 7 – Intellectual property rights, 10 – Information society and media

24-06-2014
Negotiations are opened on Chapters 4 – Free movement of capitals, 31 – Foreign, security and defence policy 32 – Financial control

16-12-2014
Negotiations are opened on Chapters 18 – Statistics, 28 – Consumer and health protection, 29 – Customs Union, 33 – Financial and budgetary provisions.

30-03-2015
Negotiations are opened on Chapters 16 – Taxation, 30 – External relations.

22-06-2015
Negotiations are opened on Chapters 9 – Financial services and 21 – TENs

21-12-2015
Negotiations are opened on Chapters 14 – Transport policy and 15 – Energy

30-06-2016
Negotiations are opened on Chapters 12 – Food safety, veterinary and phytosanitary policy and 13 – Fisheries.

MONTENEGRO



20-06-2017
Negotiations are opened on Chapter 1 - free movement of goods and Chapter 22 - regional policy and Negotiations are provisionally closed on Chapter 30 - external relations.

25-06-2018
Negotiations are opened on Chapter 17: Economic and monetary policy

30-06-2020
Negotiations are opened on Chapter 8: Competition policy

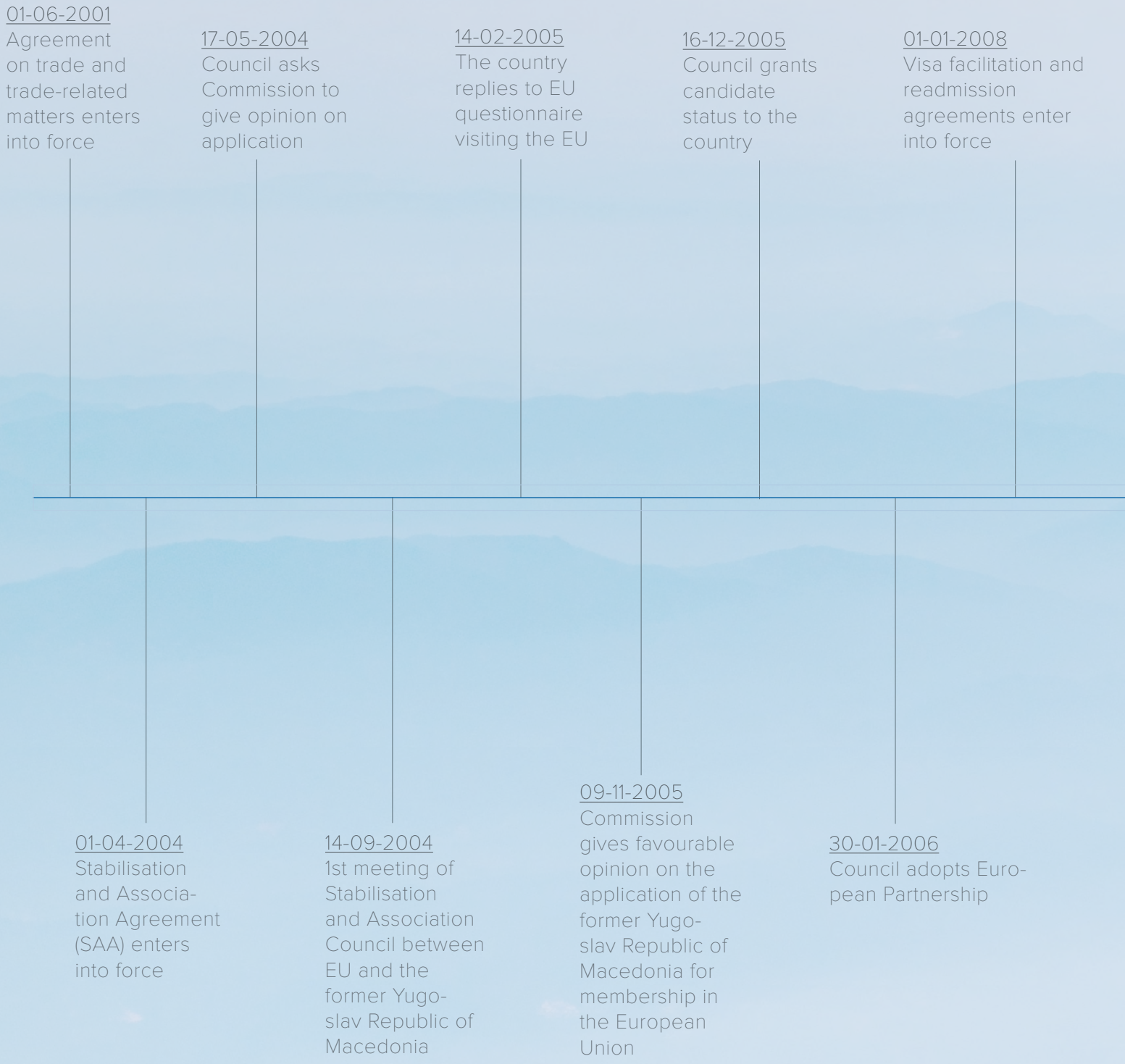
13-12-2016
Negotiations are opened on Chapters 11 - Agriculture and rural development and Chapter 19 - Social policy and employment.

11-12-2017
Negotiations are opened on Chapter 2: Freedom of movement for workers and Chapter 3: Right of establishment and freedom to provide services.

10-12-2018
Negotiations are opened on Chapter 27: Environment and climate change



Timeline of the accession process of **candidate / potential candidate countries**



NORTH MACEDONIA



01-03-2008
Commission adopts Communication on the Western Balkans identifying benchmarks for next stage in accession process

01-10-2009
Commission recommends opening of accession negotiations

01-11-2010
Second recommendation to open accession negotiations

29-03-2012
European Commission launches a High Level Accession Dialogue with Skopje

01-10-2013
Fifth recommendation to open accession negotiations

15-07-2009
Commission proposes to grant visa liberalisation to the country

19-12-2009
Citizens of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia travel visa free to the Schengen area

01-10-2011
Third recommendation to open accession negotiations

01-10-2012
Fourth recommendation to open accession negotiations

01-10-2014
Sixth recommendation to open accession negotiations

NORTH MACEDONIA

01-06-2015
The Commission presented "Urgent Reform Priorities" to address the underlying rule of law issues

01-11-2015
The Commission stated that it was prepared to extend its recommendation to open accession negotiations provided the continued implementation of the June/July political agreement

01-06-2018
The Council sets out the path towards opening accession negotiations

25-03-2020
The Council decides to open accession negotiations

01-07-2020
Presentation of the draft negotiating framework to the Member States

01-07-2015
Pržino agreement, facilitated by Commissioner Hahn and three Members of the European Parliament, reached between the four main political leaders

01-04-2018
The Commission repeats its unconditional recommendation to open accession negotiations

01-02-2019
The EU is notified about th entry into force of the Prespa agreement

26-03-2020
The European Council endorsed the decision to open accession negotiations



Timeline of the accession process of **candidate / potential candidate countries**



SERBIA



14-10-2011
European Commission delivers its Opinion on Serbia's EU membership application, granting candidate status based on one key priority

28-06-2013
European Council endorsed the Commission's recommendation to open negotiations with Serbia

17-12-2013
Council adopted the negotiating framework with Serbia and agreed to hold the 1st Intergovernmental Conference with Serbia in January 2014

14-12-2015
Opening of Chapters 32 "financial control and 35 "other issues - Item 1: Normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo"

13-12-2016
Opening of Chapters 5, Public procurement, and 25, Science and Research. Chapter 25, Science and Research, provisionally closed

31-01-2011
Serbia replies to Commission questionnaire

01-03-2012
European Council confirms Serbia as candidate country

01-09-2013
Entry into force of the EU-Serbia Stabilisation and Association Agreement

21-01-2014
1st EU-Serbia Intergovernmental Conference held

18-07-2016
Opening of Chapters 23 "Judiciary and fundamental rights" and 24 "Justice, freedom and security"

SERBIA

27-02-2017
Opening of Chapters 20, Enterprise and industrial policy, and 26, Education and culture. Chapter 26, Education and culture, provisionally closed

11-12-2017
Opening of Chapters 6, Company law, and 30, External relations

10-12-2018
Opening of Chapters 17, Economic and monetary policy, and 18, Statistics

10-12-2019
Opening of Chapter 4 - Free movement of capital

01-12-2021
Opening of Cluster 4 on Green agenda and sustainable connectivity

20-06-2017
Opening of Chapters 7, Intellectual property law, and 29, Customs Union

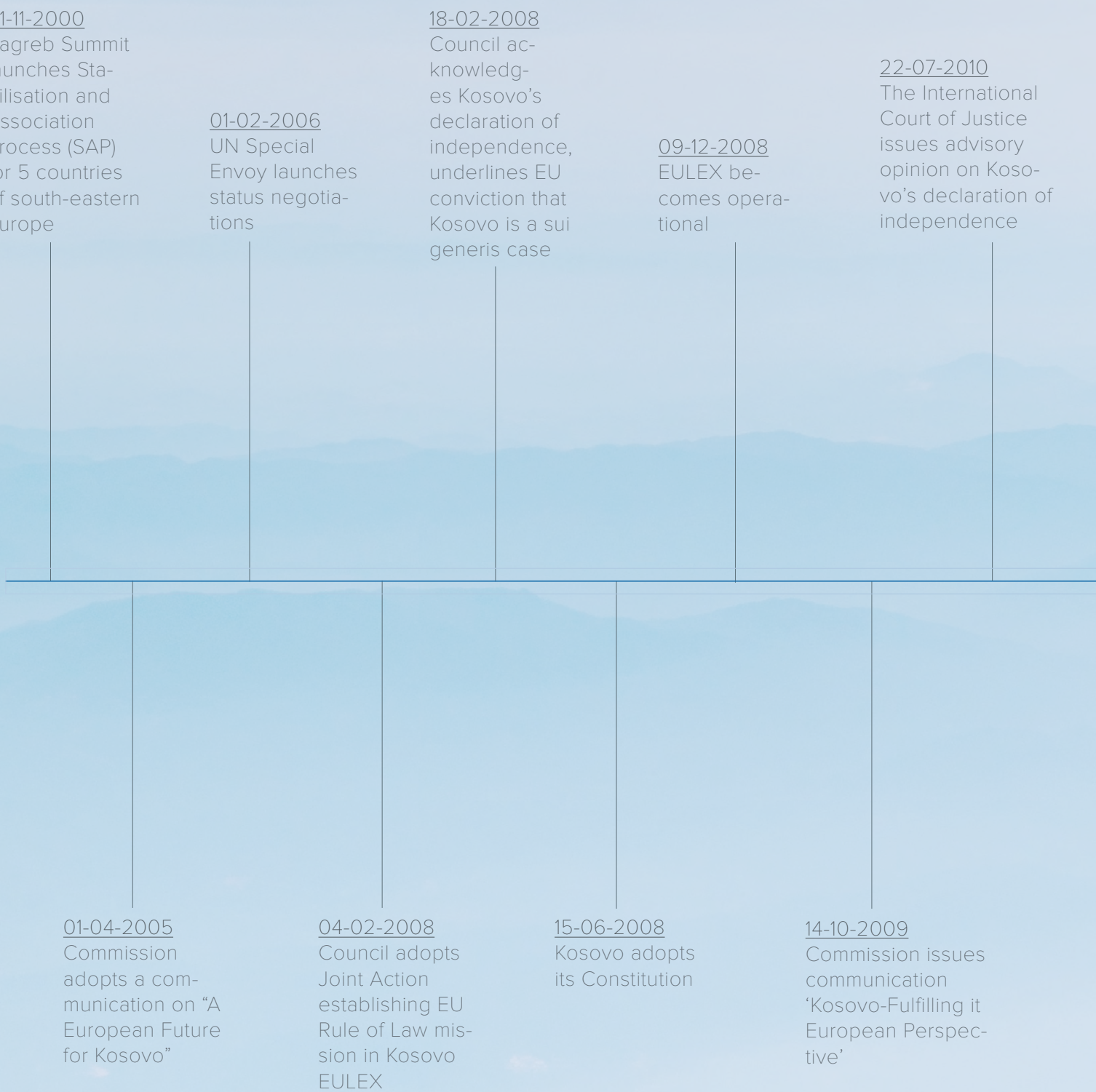
25-06-2018
Opening of Chapters 13, Fisheries, and 33, Financial and budgetary provisions

27-06-2019
Opening of Chapter 9 - Financial services

01-10-2020
18 out of 35 chapters have been opened, two of which are provisionally closed



Timeline of the accession process of **candidate / potential candidate countries**



KOSOVO



19-01-2012
Commission launches the visa liberalisation dialogue with Kosovo

14-06-2012
Commission issues Kosovo's visa liberalisation roadmap

10-10-2012
Commission issues its feasibility study for a Stabilisation and Association Agreement between the EU and Kosovo

25-07-2014
The EU and Kosovo chief negotiators initialled the Stabilisation and Association Agreement between the EU and Kosovo in Brussels

01-07-2018
Commission confirms tha Kosovo has fulfilled all ou - standing visa liberalisation benchmarks. Decision on Commission's proposal is pending in the EP and the Council

08-03-2011
Following a UN General Assembly Resolution the Kosovo-Serbia technical dialogue begins

30-05-2012
Commission launches the Structured Dialogue on the Rule of Law

10-09-2012
Kosovo declares the end of supervised independence

19-10-2012
High-level dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia as facilitated by HRVP Ashton begins

01-04-2016
The Stabilisa-tion and Asso-ciation Agree-ment between the EU and Kosovo enters into force


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