ECR GROUP



Western Balkans

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WESTERN BALKANS



There are six candidate/potential candidate countries from the Western Balkans:

- Montenegro (accession negotiation started in 2012)
- Serbia (accession negotiation started in 2014)
- The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (candidate country since 2005)
- Albania (candidate country since 2014)
- Bosnia and Herzegovina (application to join the EU submitted in February 2016)
- Kosovo (Stabilisation and Association Agreement entered into force in April 2016)

The 2018 Enlargement strategy of the European Commission has six flagship initiatives:

- Strengthen the rule of law
- Enhance support for socio-economic development
- Reinforce engagement on security and migration
- Increase transport and energy connectivity
- Develop the digital agenda for the Western Balkans
- Support reconciliation and good neighbourly relations

ENLARGEMENT CRITERIA

The Treaty on the European Union states that any European country may apply for membership if it respects the democratic values of the EU and is committed to promoting them. The EU also needs to be able to integrate new members.

Countries wishing to join the European Union must have:

- stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities;
- a functioning market economy and the capacity to cope with competition and market forces in the EU;
- the ability to take on and implement effectively the obligations of membership, including adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary union.

In order to meet the well-established membership criteria and in their own interest, the Western Balkans need to implement comprehensive reforms in crucial areas. The rule of law, fundamental rights and governance must be strengthened significantly. Judicial reforms, the fight against corruption and organised crime, and public administration reform need to deliver real results and the functioning of democratic institutions needs to be seriously enhanced. Economic reforms must be pursued with vigour and structural weaknesses, low competitiveness and high unemployment addressed.

All countries must unequivocally commit, in both word and deed, to overcoming the legacy of the past, by achieving reconciliation and solving open issues well before their accession to the EU, in particular border disputes.

* *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*

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ECR Priorities

Where should the EU make a special effort in assisting accession countries:

1. Security and migration:

- Radicalisation should be addressed since no country will be able to join the EU if there are concerns that this will pose a threat to the European security;
- Cooperation with neighbours, EU Member States, and with the European Border and Coast Guard Agency is required to manage migration flows;
- Limit Russian influence in the Western Balkans and support the countries in their wish to join NATO;

2. Economic and social development:

- Development of infrastructure and transport corridors is required to stimulate regional development, trade and people-to-people contact;
- The private sector is underdeveloped and often hampered by weaknesses in the rule of law and the enforcement of fair competition;
- The more economically developed candidate countries are at time of accession to the EU, the less internal migration to Western EU countries will follow;

3. Rule of law, the fight against corruption and organised crime:

- Political influence over the judiciary greatly undermines the rule of law;
- Corruption remains prevalent in many areas and there is a limited number of final court rulings on high-level corruption cases;
- Track record on investigations, prosecutions and convictions in the fight against organised crime needs to be improved;

4. Good neighbourly relations:

- Cross-border cooperation and good neighbourly relations could bring investment and growth to the often forgotten and underdeveloped border regions;
- National minorities is a key issue for maintaining good neighbourly relations. If the rights and freedoms of national minorities are not protected, neighbouring countries could threaten to block the EU accession negotiations.

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Key findings of the 2018 Enlargement reports:

On the 17th of April at an extraordinary meeting of the AFET committee, VP/HR Federica Mogherini and the Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations Johannes Hahn, presented the enlargement package reports for 2018. The most important part of this package are the seven individual country reports for the five candidate countries as well as the 2 partners from the Western Balkans (Kosovo and Turkey).

Accession to the EU is the current goal of the Western Balkan countries, but for some, the very commencement of the accession negotiations is already a big success. Only Serbia and Montenegro have commenced the official negotiations to join the EU and they are expected to be ready for accession in 2025. However, to achieve this, the frontrunners Serbia and Montenegro must deliver real and sustained reforms and definitive solutions to disputes with neighbours.



Charles Tannock
(ECR Rapporteur)

Montenegro

The first major success for the EU accession ambitions of Montenegro came when the country joined NATO in 2017. The European Commission notes this progress. It should be mentioned that Montenegro is the first of the candidate countries to fully align its foreign policy with the EU's. There is also significant progress in the fight against corruption and public administration reform. However, there still remain significant challenges. Public procurement procedures are still problematic in the country, and this is duly noted in the report of the European Commission. Furthermore, the country is struggling to fulfil the economic criteria. The Commission advises that the trade deficit has a negative effect on the economy, and that Montenegro's economy should focus more on exports. The shadow economy and the general business environment still remains a problem too.

***Charles Tannock (ECR Rapporteur)**: "I think that on balance the Commission report for Montenegro is a fair assessment of the progress and challenges that the country faces. That it remains the front runner in the accession process is clearly demonstrated. With nearly all negotiation chapters now opened, Montenegro is in a good position to consolidate its progress and focus efforts on those areas highlighted for improvement."*

Serbia

The European Commission acknowledges the progress in certain areas such as macroeconomic stability and the plan for administrative reform. Some progress has been achieved, especially in adopting amendments to the Criminal Code in the economic crimes section; including the law on the organisation of state authorities in the fight against corruption, organised crime and terrorism. Serbia has also continued to align its legislation with the EU acquis. There are however, other worrying trends. One example that has been noted by the Commission is the fact that some areas in Serbia which are populated by national minorities remain underfunded and underdeveloped in comparison with other areas of the country. The biggest challenge for Serbia remains the normalisation of relations with Kosovo. The European Commission recommends that the country should continue dialogue with Kosovo. Efforts should also be made in order to achieve a legally

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binding bilateral agreement for dialogue. This is regarded by the European Commission as a necessary step in order for Serbia to continue on the path of EU accession.

***Charles Tannock (ECR Shadow Rapporteur)**: Along with Montenegro, Serbia could potentially be ready for European Union membership by 2025 according to the European Commission. I welcome the ambition and strongly support enlargement for the entire region. However I remain committed to the regatta process and believe that each country must be judged on its own merit. Montenegro is clearly some way ahead of Serbia in terms of its progress and I would be disappointed to see it held back.*

The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

This year's report on the progress of FYROM was among the most positive ones. The incumbent government in the country, in power since 2016, has been productive in the process of reforming it. It has to be noted that back in 2004, FYROM was regarded as the frontrunner country from the Western Balkans in the process of EU accession. It had successfully resolved the ethnic conflict that erupted in 2001 and was on a positive path forward. Sadly, a period of stagnation followed and urgent reforms were needed. The new coalition government has been committed to ambitious internal reforms and more importantly has taken an active role in resolving the issues that exist between the country and its neighbours. A good example of this can be seen in the Treaty on friendship, good neighbourly relations and cooperation between Bulgaria and FYR of Macedonia. These efforts are assessed positively by the European Commission, which ultimately gave a recommendation for beginning negotiations with FYROM.

***Charles Tannock (ECR Shadow Rapporteur)**: I welcome the proposal to launch negotiations with Macedonia, which has sadly been left in limbo for over a decade. I hope that this can also give a boost to the ongoing talks with Greece on the name issue, clearing the way for approval by the Council later this year and ultimately the country's long discussed ambitions to join the EU.*

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Monica Macovei
(Chair of the Delegation to the EU-Albania Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee)

Albania

In regards to Albania, the European Commission has emphasised strongly the need for judicial reform in the country. The essence of the reforms is the new way in which public procurement is being conducted. Judges and administrators in the judiciary are now the subject of a thorough vetting process. The European Commission seems committed to supporting these efforts, and as with FYROM, it has given a recommendation for beginning accession negotiations.

***Monica Macovei (Chair of the Delegation to the EU-Albania Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee)**: I welcome the recent Commission's decision on recommending accession negotiations with Albania. Albania has made substantial progress in the field of public administration and justice. An all-inclusive vetting process has begun and the establishment of an independent and non-corrupt judiciary is ongoing. Measures have been adopted against criminal organisations; furthermore, an important agreement has been signed between Tirana and Frontex. I encourage the Albanian political parties to make concerted efforts in order to achieve sustainable, cross-party cooperation and reforms, and positively contribute to Albania's progress towards the EU.*



Bas Belder
(ECR Shadow Rapporteur)

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Sadly, the European Commission notes a period of stagnation when it comes to Bosnia's path of accession. The report points out the structural issues in the way in which the institutions in the country function. The Commission notes that the reforms are insufficient across all areas. Another major issue is the fact that the country still does not have a national programme for aligning the legislation with the EU acquis. There are also issues regarding human rights and fundamental freedoms.

***Bas Belder (ECR Shadow Rapporteur)**: The progress Bosnia and Herzegovina made over the last year on its path towards EU integration has unfortunately remained very limited. Further actions are urgently needed at a much quicker pace, e.g. in areas of reform of the public administration and judiciary, reform of the election law with a view on the forthcoming elections and in combating wide-spread corruption. The security situation in the country remains an issue of concern given the separatist rhetoric in Republica Srpska and the return of foreign fighters. I am of the opinion that the path towards EU integration is the only viable option for the future of the country and its people.*

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Angel Dzhambazki
(ECR Shadow Rapporteur)

Kosovo*

An important achievement for Kosovo is the signing of the border demarcation agreement with Montenegro in March 2018, one of the key requirements of the European Commission to move forward with the visa liberalisation for Kosovo. The other prerequisite for obtaining visa free regime is to create a credible track record in the fight against organised crime, however, there is still a long way to go in order to achieve this. This is in part, due to the inability of the new coalition government to bring forward strategic EU related reforms in the judicial system, the fight against corruption and the fight against organised crime. Kosovo's economy, on the other hand, while still at a development phase, has made good progress. This could be attributed to the government's adherence to a strict fiscal rule on its budget deficit as well as Kosovo's improved business climate. However, the economy's informal nature and remaining corruption remain major challenges. The main issue that still holds back Kosovo and its further integration, is its relations with Serbia and the fact that several EU Members States still do not recognise the independence of Kosovo. While the European Commission notes that Kosovo has remained engaged in dialogue, it needs to make further efforts.

***Angel Dzhambazki (ECR Shadow Rapporteur)**: I would like to congratulate the Kosovo authorities, who despite strong opposition from some parties, where teargas was used to disrupt the parliamentary work and voting process, the Parliament of Kosovo still managed to ratify the long awaited border demarcation agreement with Montenegro. Now is the time for Kosovo to focus on reforming its judicial system and make enormous efforts to fight corruption and organised crime. Building a track record in this field will not only help the country to move forward towards a visa free regime for the Kosovo people traveling to the EU, but it may also improve the chances of this country gaining additional recognition.*

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Timeline of the accession process of canadidate / potential candidate countries:

Montenegro	
22-01-2007	Council adopts European Partnership for Montenegro
15-10-2007	Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) signed in Luxembourg
01-01-2008	Agreements on trade and trade-related matters, visa facilitation and readmission enter into force
15-12-2008	Montenegro applies for EU membership
19-12-2009	Visa requirement lifted for Montenegrins visiting the EU
01-05-2010	Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) enters into force
17-12-2010	Council confirms Montenegro as candidate country
09-12-2011	Council launches accession process with Montenegro in a view to open negotiations in June 2012
26-06-2012	The European Council endorsed the Commission's assessment that Montenegro complies with the membership criteria and can start accession negotiations on 29 June 2012.
29-06-2012	Accession negotiations with Montenegro started on 29 June 2012.
18-12-2012	Accession conference - First chapter provisionally closed (Science and Research)
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.
13-12-2016	Negotiations are opened on Chapters 11 - Agriculture and rural development and Chapter 19 - Social policy and employment.
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.
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.

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Serbia	
03-05-2006	SAA negotiations called off, because Serbia's co-operation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia has not improved
13-06-2007	SAA negotiations resume, after Serbia commits to cooperating fully with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia
07-11-2007	SAA with Serbia is initialled
01-01-2008	Agreements on visa facilitation and readmission enter into force
18-02-2008	Council adopts revised European partnership for Serbia
29-04-2008	Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) and Interim agreement on trade and trade-related issues are signed in Luxembourg
19-12-2009	Visa requirement lifted for Serbs travelling to Schengen countries
22-12-2009	Serbia applies for EU membership
14-06-2010	EU members decide to start SAA ratification process
31-01-2011	Serbia replies to Commission questionnaire
14-10-2011	European Commission delivers its Opinion on Serbia's EU membership application, granting candidate status based on one key priority
01-03-2012	European Council confirms Serbia as a candidate country
28-06-2013	European Council endorsed the Commission's recommendation to open negotiations with Serbia
01-09-2013	Entry into force of the EU-Serbia Stabilisation and Association Agreement
17-12-2013	Council adopted the negotiating framework with Serbia and agreed to hold the 1st Intergovernmental Conference with Serbia in January 2014
21-01-2014	1st EU-Serbia Intergovernmental Conference held
14-12-2015	Opening of Chapters 32 "financial control" and 35 "other issues - Item 1: Normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo "
18-07-2016	Opening of Chapters 23 "Judiciary and fundamental rights" and 24 "Justice, freedom and security"
13-12-2016	Opening of Chapters 5, Public procurement, and 25, Science and Research. Chapter 25, Science and Research, provisionally closed
27-02-2017	Opening of Chapters 20, Enterprise and industrial policy, and 26, Education and culture. Chapter 26, Education and culture, provisionally closed
20-06-2017	Opening of Chapters 7, Intellectual property law, and 29, Customs Union
11-12-2017	Opening of Chapters 6, Company law, and 30, External relations

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The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia	
01-06-2001	Agreement on trade and trade-related matters enters into force
01-04-2004	Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) enters into force
17-05-2004	Council asks Commission to give opinion on application
14-09-2004	1st meeting of Stabilisation and Association Council between EU and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia
14-02-2005	The country replies to EU questionnaire
09-11-2005	Commission gives favourable opinion on the application of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia for membership in the European Union
16-12-2005	Council grants candidate status to the country
30-01-2006	Council adopts European Partnership
01-01-2008	Visa facilitation and readmission agreements enter into force
01-03-2008	Commission adopts Communication on the Western Balkans identifying benchmarks for next stage in accession process
15-07-2009	Commission proposes to grant visa liberalisation to the country
01-10-2009	Commission recommends opening of accession negotiations
19-12-2009	Citizens of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia travel visa free to the Schengen area
01-11-2010	Second recommendation to open accession negotiations
01-10-2011	Third recommendation to open accession negotiations
29-03-2012	European Commission launches a High Level Accession Dialogue with Skopje
01-10-2012	Fourth recommendation to open accession negotiations
01-10-2013	Fifth recommendation to open accession negotiations
01-10-2014	Sixth recommendation to open accession negotiations
01-06-2015	The Commission presented “Urgent Reform Priorities” to address the underlying rule of law issues
01-07-2015	Pržino agreement, facilitated by Commissioner Hahn and three Members of the European Parliament, reached between the four main political leaders
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

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Albania	
01-06-2004	Council adopts European partnership with Albania
01-05-2006	EU-Albania Readmission Agreement enters into force
12-06-2006	Stabilisation and Association Agreement and Interim Agreement is signed
01-12-2006	Interim agreement enters into force
01-01-2007	IPA funds available to help Albania prepare for membership
01-01-2008	EU-Albania visa facilitation agreement enters into force
01-04-2009	Stabilisation and association agreement enters into force
24-04-2009	Albania submits its application for EU membership
09-11-2010	European Commission delivers opinion on Albania's EU membership application
15-12-2010	Visa free regime for Schengen area introduced for all Albanian citizens having a biometric passport
01-02-2011	An action plan addressing the 12 key priorities identified in the European Commission opinion is adopted by Albania
10-10-2012	European Commission recommends that Albania be granted EU candidate status, subject to completion of key measures in certain areas
12-11-2013	The EU and Albania hold the first meeting of the High Level Dialogue on Key Priorities
27-06-2014	The Council granted the candidate status to Albania in June 2014

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Bosnia and Herzegovina	
25-11-2005	Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) negotiations officially opened in Sarajevo
18-09-2007	Visa facilitation and readmission agreements signed
04-12-2007	EU initials Stabilization and Association Agreement
01-01-2008	Visa facilitation and readmission agreements enter into force
18-02-2008	Council adopts new European partnership
16-06-2008	Stabilization and Association Agreement and Interim Agreement on trade and trade-related issues signed
01-07-2008	Interim Agreement on trade and trade-related issues enters into force
31-07-2008	Bosnia and Herzegovina & EU sign financing agreement for the instrument for pre-accession assistance (IPA) 2007 National Programme
27-05-2010	Commission adopts proposal allowing citizens of Albania & Bosnia and Herzegovina to travel to Schengen countries without a short-term visa
15-12-2010	Visa free regime for Schengen area introduced for all BiH citizens having a biometric passport
01-09-2011	Delegation of the European Union and Office of the EU Special Representative become one reinforced EU presence
27-06-2012	The EU and Bosnia and Herzegovina launched the High Level Dialogue on the Accession Process
01-06-2015	The SAA with Bosnia and Herzegovina enters into force
15-02-2016	BiH submits its application to join the EU
20-09-2016	EU Council invites the Commission to present an Opinion on BiH application

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Kosovo	
01-11-2000	Zagreb Summit launches Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) for 5 countries of south-eastern Europe
01-04-2005	Commission adopts a communication on “A European Future for Kosovo”
01-02-2006	UN Special Envoy launches status negotiations
04-02-2008	Council adopts Joint Action establishing EU Rule of Law mission in Kosovo EULEX
18-02-2008	Council acknowledges Kosovo’s declaration of independence, underlines EU conviction that Kosovo is a sui generis case
15-06-2008	Kosovo adopts its Constitution
09-12-2008	EULEX becomes operational
14-10-2009	Commission issues communication ‘Kosovo-Fulfilling its European Perspective’
22-07-2010	The International Court of Justice issues advisory opinion on Kosovo’s declaration of independence
08-03-2011	Following a UN General Assembly Resolution the Kosovo-Serbia technical dialogue begins
19-01-2012	Commission launches the visa liberalisation dialogue with Kosovo
30-05-2012	Commission launches the Structured Dialogue on the Rule of Law
14-06-2012	Commission issues Kosovo’s visa liberalisation roadmap
10-09-2012	Kosovo declares the end of supervised independence
10-10-2012	Commission issues its feasibility study for a Stabilisation and Association Agreement between the EU and Kosovo
19-10-2012	High-level dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia as facilitated by HRVP Ashton begins
25-07-2014	The EU and Kosovo chief negotiators initialled the Stabilisation and Association Agreement between the EU and Kosovo in Brussels
01-04-2016	The Stabilisation and Association Agreement between the EU and Kosovo enters into force

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