Navigating the European Union's Enlargement Dilemma: Where do the WB6 Stand in the EU Accession Process?

CAMR - Centrum pre analýzy monitoring a reporting

Authors: Hana Syla and Marco Garzia

Supervisor: Fitore Fejza

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List of Abbreviations:

1. ACIT: Albanian Centre for Competitiveness and International Trade

2. EPIK: European Policy Institute of Kosovo

3. WB6: Western Balkans six (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia

Introduction

From Kyiv to Tirana, and from Tbilisi to Sarajevo, there is a significant eagerness to join the European Union. However, a pressing question arises: do Brussels and the current EU member states genuinely desire new commitments while grappling with ongoing challenges (high inflation, economic downturns, impacts of COVID-19, discords among certain member states, and most recently, the Ukrainian war)? Is expansion currently a priority? Or has it been temporarily put on hold? Given these adverse circumstances, is the prospect of enlargement realistically feasible?

In light of these questions and more, this concise research explores the current state of the accession process for Western Balkan countries aiming to join the European Union. We begin by examining Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, all of which are officially candidates for EU membership. We then proceed to analyze Kosovo, which holds the status of a potential candidate. Through this examination, we delve into the dynamics, obstacles, and expectations of these countries' progress in their EU integration journey, evaluating whether the region as a whole has moved closer to this aspiration.

1. Albania's Progress towards EU Membership

Albania was recognized as a potential EU member candidate during the Thessaloniki European Council in 2003. However, it was not until June 2014 (EU Data 2023), that it officially received the status of a candidate country. As of March 2020, accession negotiations took off based on the political agreement of the ministers for European affairs. Ever since then, the country has continued its numerous endeavours to join the EU. As recently reported by the ACIT Centre & EPIK Institute (2022), 89% of survey participants from Albania express strong confidence that becoming an EU member will result in growth and progress.

Given that the EU's assessment heavily relies on critical areas such as the economy, judiciary, and democracy level, Albania's status quo in these domains is crucial to note. As per the European Council's yearly assessment of advancements in the Western Balkans region, it was determined that Albania has made notable strides in improving the rule of law. This has been done particularly through the implementation of justice reforms and ongoing efforts to combat corruption and organized crime. A significant reform in this context included the rigorous vetting of the judiciary, resulting in the removal of over 60 percent of judges and prosecutors throughout the country due to their illegal or unprofessional conduct (Prifti 2022). Furthermore, Albania has "a level of preparation in the fight against corruption" as well as "some level of preparation in the fight against organized crime" (European Commission 2022, 3–5). Amongst others, Albania has shown commendable advancement

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[2] https://pixabay.com/photos/flag-banner-nation-emblem-country-2525677/

in meeting economic criteria and is reasonably equipped for a well-functioning market economy (European Commission 2022, 6).

While there have been significant strides in these areas and Albania continues to be seen as aligning with European values and principles, there remain crucial stages that have not yet been met for its complete integration. Deficiencies in the functioning of the judiciary system, struggles with corruption, human rights, media freedom, minority rights, and so on, remain the main challenges hindering the process (Stanicek 2021). Additionally, events unfolding in the region undoubtedly hold significant importance for Albania's progress in this journey. An illustrative example of this is the earlier blockade initiated by Greece and then by Bulgaria on North Macedonia. This prolonged process of North Macedonia's integration challenged Albania's trajectory too. As French President Macron stated, "We mustn't open accession talks with North Macedonia before Albania - there must be a majority for talks with both, together" (BBC, 2019).

It is evident that the major backing from Albania's populace to join the EU, the significant judicial reforms, as well as the endorsement of EU membership by its leadership have pushed Albania to have a steady and positive path towards EU accession (Homel 2023). However, considering both the internal circumstances and those in the region, attaining the ultimate outcome is likely to require a significant amount of time for Albania.

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2. North Macedonia's Progress and Milestones in the EU Accession Process

The lengthy process towards North Macedonia's EU accession, initiated on the 22nd of March 2004 with its formal application, has reached a turning point in July 2022. This marked the opening of the first intergovernmental panel between the two parties. Indeed, it represented a great achievement that came after over 17 years of the country's status as an EU candidate. Similar to its neighbouring countries, the negotiations focus on 35 policy fields (chapters) and demand an intense period of reforms for the nation. This challenge was accepted by North Macedonia, as shown by the *2022 North Macedonia Report* of the European Commission.

However, the power wielded by member states to enforce vetoes on aspiring countries poses a significant problem, especially in North Macedonia's case. Greece was the first one to impose a veto on North Macedonia, on the argument that the name of the country inferred ambitions concerning Greece's territory. As the dispute lingered, it was agreed for the name to be changed constitutionally from Macedonia to North Macedonia. This led Greece to lift its veto in 2019. Nevertheless, North Macedonia now faces another major challenge due to Bulgaria's veto, arising from disputes over how North Macedonia interprets its language. Specifically, the disagreement stems from Bulgaria's assertion that the Macedonian language is not a distinct language but rather a dialect of Bulgarian.

Such a complex web of challenges paints a puzzling path for the country's imminent integration into the EU.

Furthermore, concerning the current status of North Macedonia's progress in important EU segments, the Commission has observed limited improvements in a restricted set of clusters, including:

1. Parliamentary oversight over the intelligence services
2. Public administration reforms
3. Freedom of expression

Moreover, moderate progress was highlighted in matters of:

1. Democracy and the rule of law
2. Judicial reforms
3. Prevention and fight against corruption
4. Fight against organized crime
5. Fight against terrorism and prevention/countering of violent extremism
6. Protection of fundamental rights
7. Regional cooperation
8. Development of a market economy
9. Resilience to competitive pressures and EU market forces
10. Harmonization of its internal market with EU standards
11. Green agenda and sustainable connectivity
12. Resources, agriculture, and cohesion
13. External relations
14. Migration

Because of the numerous obstacles the country is facing in its progress, it is probable that achieving a final result will also take more time for North Macedonia. Despite the challenges, North Macedonia is showing a clear willingness to further integrate with the EU. However, it must be noted that the country is not exempt from the political polarization that frequently affects the Western Balkans.

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3. The Complex Dynamics of Montenegro's EU Integration

One of the youngest and smallest countries in Europe, Montenegro, applied for EU membership on the 15th of December 2008. The country received EU candidate status in December 2010, following the European Commission's positive opinion on its application. Since 2012, 14 accession negotiations have taken place, covering 33 out of the 35 policy fields (otherwise known as chapters) that the country is required to address before officially joining the EU.

Nonetheless, to quote the *2022 Montenegro Report* of the European Commission, "*the country continued the work on alignment with the EU acquis in many areas, however overall the progress made was limited*". As for similar reports, the Commission has observed the country's developments in a series of critical areas and has highlighted limited to no progress over:

1. Comprehensive reforms of the electoral legal and institutional framework
2. Political dialogue
3. Public administration reforms
4. Reforms of the judicial system
5. The fight against corruption
6. EU recommendations on freedom of expression
7. The ability to assume the responsibilities of EU membership

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[4] https://pixabay.com/photos/flag-banner-nation-emblem-country-2528921/

However, moderate progress was detected in the following areas:

1. Parliamentary transparency
2. Strengthening of the civil society's role
3. Fight against organized crime
4. Protection of fundamental rights
5. Establishment of a market economy
6. Capacity to cope with competitive pressures and EU market forces
7. Regional cooperation and external relations
8. Internal market parameters
9. Competitiveness and inclusive growth
10. Green agenda and sustainable connectivity
11. Resources agriculture and cohesion
12. Migration

Overall, the largest obstacle for Montenegro in this process remains the relative fragility and volatility of the country's political system. Political tensions and polarization, even within political parties themselves, inevitably constrain Montenegro's capacity to maintain the political stability required to join the EU. In this regard, the political climate has been impacted by two factors. First, by the controversial *Fundamental Agreement* between the country and the *Serbian Orthodox Church* in 2022. Second, by the opening of a new political chapter with President Jakov Milatovic after 30 years of Milo Djukanovic's leadership. Although the current President has pledged to speed up the integration process with the EU, his rumoured ties with Serbia and Russia could lead Montenegro to uncharted waters.

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4. Challenges and Controversies in Serbia's Path to EU Integration

Serbia was designated to be a potential EU membership candidate during the Thessaloniki European Council in 2003. In 2009, it formally submitted its application for EU membership and was granted the status of an EU candidate in 2012. Despite the time passed, Serbia has achieved minimal concrete advancement toward EU membership (Juzová, Burazer, and Roginer 2022), which casts uncertainty on its progress in important segments. Moreover, in contrast to other countries in the region, Serbia stands out as the only one where EU accession is not widely perceived as beneficial. Only 38% of Serbian respondents believe that their country's EU membership would have positive effects on the economy (ACIT Centre and EPIK Institute 2022).

The European Commission's 2022 annual report emphasized that Serbia's road to EU membership is intricately linked to its advancements in the areas of judiciary and fundamental rights, freedom of expression, combat of corruption, media independence, and the attainment of normalized relations with Kosovo. Considering these aspects, Serbia has made certain preparations to fight organized crime, according to the report, albeit with limited progress during the reporting period. There was no observable advancement in the area of freedom of expression within the same reporting period,

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[5] https://pixabay.com/photos/flag-banner-nation-emblem-country-2529076/

however, there was moderate progress in its economy and judiciary system (European Commission 2022c).

Just as in Kosovo's case, Serbia's progress in this process is intricately tied to the normalization of relations with the former. Recent initiatives like the Franco-German plan were highlighted by disputes and reluctance on the Serbian side. Article 4 of the plan clearly promoted unhindered integration of both parties into international organizations, with Serbia committing not to object to Kosovo's membership. However, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić's statements opposing discussions on Kosovo's recognition and membership in international organizations contradicted these commitments (RTS, 2023). Such declarations, characterized by an undemocratic, dangerous, and intrusive nature, have not contributed positively to Serbia's accession process.

It is also crucial to note that Serbia preserved a close relationship with Russia regardless of its illegal aggression in Ukraine, evading the EU's restrictive measures against it (Novaković 2022). This position raises high uncertainty about the course Serbia intends to chart. Such developments have not bolstered its prospects for EU integration in a positive manner, which risks prolonging the process further.

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5. Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU Integration Efforts

Being possibly the epitome of the complex and delicate past few decades in the Western Balkans, Bosnia and Herzegovina officially presented its application for EU membership on the 15th of February 2016. This marked the initiation of a lengthy process, aiming for the country's integration with its broader neighbourhood. Since December 2022, the country has held the status of EU candidate while the Council, the EU institution in charge of membership negotiations, awaits the implementation of the necessary reforms on 14 key priorities recommended by the European Commission in May 2019. These priorities focus primarily on democracy and functionality of the state, the rule of law, fundamental rights, and public administration.

According to the 2022 Bosnia and Herzegovina Report of the European Commission, the country has registered limited to no progress in the following critical areas over the observed period:

1. Constitutional and electoral reforms
2. Public administration reforms
3. Judicial reforms
4. Fight and prevent corruption and organized crime
5. Protection of fundamental civil rights
6. Functioning of its market economy

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[6] https://pixabay.com/photos/flag-banner-nation-emblem-country-2526557/

7. Capacity to cope with EU competitive and market pressures

8. Alignment of its economy with the EU acquis requirements

9. Competitiveness and inclusive growth

10. Statistics

11. Green agenda and sustainable connectivity

12. Resources, agriculture, and cohesion

On the other hand, moderate progress was registered in the following, equally as critical, areas:

1. Migration management

2. Public procurement

3. Financial control

4. External relations

However, the country still faces numerous internal dysfunctionalities. These are largely related to its weaker institutional framework and the endeavours of one of its three constituent entities, namely Republika Srpska. Political obstructionism attempts at taking over state prerogatives (taxation, defence, security etc.), dismantling state institutions, ambitions for a neutral stance on the Ukraine conflict, and challenges in the freedom of assembly are some of the highlighted signs of the increasing polarization faced by the ethnically diverse Federation.

The inheritance of a conflictual and deeply troubled history is a potential obstacle that could severely slow down the country's accession process. This could also be exploited by foreign actors to destabilize the Federation leveraging its open wounds.

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6. Kosovo's Complex Journey Towards EU Integration

Kosovo's path towards freedom has been marked by numerous challenges. It began with the war in 1999, followed by strides to achieve independence in 2008 and continued with a diplomatic journey of normalizing relations with Serbia since 2011. Throughout all these years, gaining EU membership has remained a longstanding aspiration for the nation. Overall, 73% of the population strongly agrees that EU membership will bring progress to the country (ACIT Centre & EPIK Institute, 2022).

Kosovo has navigated a series of complex processes to bring its ambitions to the forefront. One of these was the official submission of its application for European Union membership on 15 December 2022. In this crucial juncture of its pursuit for closer ties with the EU, the country has yet not received any response from the EU. This absence of a reply unmistakably indicates that Kosovo has a substantial journey ahead to achieve integration.

Although Kosovo has achieved notable reforms aligned with the EU's normative framework, particularly in the areas of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law (Mexhuani 2023, 4), the country is still in the initial phases of establishing an effective judicial system, anti-corruption and organized crime combat strategy (European Commission 2022). Additionally, there are two significant factors that largely challenge Kosovo, namely the unsettled dialogue with Serbia and the lack of recognition from some EU member states. The dialogue was initially started as a pathway to

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[7] https://pixabay.com/photos/flag-banner-nation-emblem-country-2526514/

reaching a definitive agreement between both countries. However, it is clear that, up to the present moment, a conclusive accord has not been reached. Despite efforts to expedite the negotiations, including the recent Franco-German plan, final disagreements from the Serbian side led to the withdrawal of their signature on the proposal. Elements of the plan involved recognizing Kosovo's independent status, a stance strongly opposed by the Serbian President (RTS 2023), which directly conflicts with European democratic values and challenges Kosovo's integration journey.

Bechev (2022) contends that the region overall has experienced delays, partly because it does not hold a top-tier position on the EU's agenda and the EU's priorities might have shifted due to the recent developments in Ukraine. However, one could argue that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has both hindered and advanced Kosovo's path to EU integration. The hindrance has been enforced by means of Russia's goal to obstruct the integration of Kosovo into the EU through its influence in Serbia (Branislav and Caprile 2023). On the other hand, recent escalations in northern Kosovo have compelled both the EU and the UN to take more decisive actions to resolve the dialogue issue, recognizing the potential for instability in Europe if the process is delayed further.

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Conclusion

The Western Balkan countries stand to benefit from the enlargement process and their potential entry into the EU, contingent on implementing reforms in economic, political, and judicial domains (European Council, 2023). Data collected from each country in the region indicates their moderate progress in certain domains, albeit insufficient to meet EU standards comprehensively.

The process appears to be marked by various obstacles, with multiple actors influencing its dynamics, depending on their political will. On one hand, certain EU member states pose significant challenges to prospective members such as Kosovo, not recognizing its independence. On the other hand, influential member states exercise their veto power, deciding which prospective countries can't move forward without meeting their prerequisites. An example of this is North Macedonia, which currently faces challenges due to Bulgaria's blockade. The latter holds that negotiations can start only when North Macedonia addresses its concerns regarding the interpretation of its language. Proven by Moldova and Ukraine, the war in Ukraine has had a great impact in expediting the enlargement process. However, as proven by Montenegro, which has made significant progress in closing the policy chapters but still awaits a response, it seems that the WB6 is still a long way ahead in this path.

In response to this situation, the German Minister of State at the Federal Foreign Office, Anna Luehrmann, has highlighted the need for reform within the European Union. Specifically, she has advocated for the removal of the veto power held by member nations. Luehrmann emphasized that the expansion of the EU to include countries from the Western Balkans can only prevent the weakening of the European Union if it is preceded by the elimination of the veto power of the member states (TVP World 2023). This initiative from Germany comes at an opportune time. Given the historical tendency for veto power to be weaponized in similar scenarios, the same has resulted in significant obstacles for prospective members in the enlargement process. This has not been advantageous for many applying countries, and it has not contributed to the minimization of instability in the region. Thus, such a step would help expedite and streamline the entire procedure.

However, EU leaders seem to have internal disagreements concerning the issue overall. For instance, Charles Michel projected at the Bled Forum in Slovenia that the Balkan integration into the EU shall be completed by 2030 (Jones, 2023). EU officials dismissed his statement after, highlighting that Michel had not sought input from Commission President Ursula von der Leyen concerning it (Sorgi, 2023). This communicates an important message about the current stage of the EU regarding the

matter: still neutral, still uncertain and still not planning to give the green light for accession to WB6 in the near future.

As highlighted in the Berlin Process summit, the current status quo in WB6 underscores that the countries still have a substantial journey ahead to attain membership in the EU. Considering this, it seems optimistic to assume that the region will get approval for accession to the EU soon.

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