

Safeguarding peace and stability in the Western Balkans demands the EU's full involvement

Conflicts are flaring up in the Western Balkans, jeopardising not only regional relations but also the European integration process of many of the (potential) candidate countries. These recent developments have exposed the fragility of democratic systems in the region. In light of the influence of third parties in the region due to a drop in EU presence, and the erupting historic tensions, there is a profound danger to peace and stability in the Western Balkans.

The perspective of European Union membership has for almost two decades offered an incentive for reform in the Western Balkans. But enlargement has dramatically shifted down the list of priorities as the EU is facing a myriad of internal and external challenges, not in the least a changing geopolitical environment and the need to reinvent itself as the EU27.

The deteriorating EU-Russia relationship is also reflected in dynamics in the Western Balkans. All in all, a positive narrative and enlargement momentum are currently missing in spite of some developments and achievements in the individual countries' accession processes.

Present all over Europe, including in the Western Balkans, the European Movement works actively for an integrated and democratic Europe. We remind that the examples from the last enlargements confirm that the accession process had a huge impact on the reform processes and economic development in the respective countries. In the Western Balkan countries, the perspective of accession to the EU has been the key leverage for fragile democracies to continue the reform process, democratisation and establishment of the rule of law. This also means that the Western Balkan countries should become EU members after they fulfill the enlargement criteria on individual and merit based principles. Essential in their transformation is the acceptance of European values - peace, democracy, pluralism, rule of law, human rights – unfortunately often challenged in practice in the EU itself, which undermines its credibility.

The European Movement shares the growing concern about the fragile situation in the Western Balkans. There is a real danger that the region is further drawn into geopolitical power-play and that the exploitation of historical dividing lines ignites new conflicts. There is also a genuine responsibility for the regions' leaders to maintain peace and stability as a precondition for democratic development and prosperity. These are not just empty words but, as the Balkans know only too well, the only alternative that is beneficial for all citizens in this part of Europe. Regional meetings and dialogue on contested issues must be more frequent, constructive and inclusive.

The EU needs to give its full attention to the developments in the region, support democratic and economic development and urge for caution and restraint on the side of its Western Balkan partners. At the same time the EU needs to include enlargement in all strategic reflections of the EU's common future as well as to reassess and improve available instruments, including support for CSO capacity building, for a successful enlargement process based on the principles described above. The EU should engage individually with each country to see what the EU can offer in terms of conciliation and support, using a more credible enlargement perspective as leverage where possible.

It is crucial that both top-down and bottom-up actors work towards ensuring a safe democratic space where citizens can discuss freely, democratic decisions can be made by functioning institutions, and be implemented by a responsible government.

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