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EU Enlargement in the Balkans: New Prospects for Resolving Old Challenges

Tomasz Żornaczuk

On 6 February, the European Commission adopted the document titled, “A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans.” This special document, published outside the regular order, announces a return to the perception of enlargement as Union strategic policy. It is a response to the stagnation in the process and external threats, primarily from Russia. To strengthen Member State support of the Balkans on their path to the EU, Poland can complement its own actions with those based on the guidelines found in the new document.

The “enlargement perspective” complements the standard, annual enlargement package: a strategy and progress reports on individual candidate countries for EU membership. The Commission presented the new document after the usual enlargement package was not published last autumn for the first time. The publication of the package in April instead, as announced by the EC, is to justify the synchronisation of it with the so-called European Semester. This will enable the European Council to make decisions regarding the Balkans at its June summits, not in December. Thus, the EC has used the year and a half break between the publication of the packages to strengthen enlargement policy. The focus of the new document on the countries of the Western Balkans—the only realistic direction of Union enlargement, omitting Turkey—serves this purpose.

A Positive Agenda for Difficult Times. The landmark element of the document is the indication of 2025 as the possible date of Montenegro’s and Serbia’s accession to the EU, after these countries meet their membership conditions. The Commission’s declaration follows a couple of years of stagnation in enlargement policy. After the completion of the so-called big enlargement in 2007, each year at least one Balkan country saw significant progress on their path to the EU, including applications for membership, official candidate status, completion of accession negotiations, or, as in the case of Croatia, completion and accession to the Union in 2013. The commencement of negotiations with Serbia in January 2014 was the last of the regular achievements. Jean Claude Juncker in September 2014 declared that during his term as leader of the European Commission the EU would not be enlarged. That stemmed from, among other things, the length of the negotiation process. However, in the Balkans it was sometimes seen as a political decision. The new Commission document is therefore a contrast to that declaration.

The “enlargement perspective” is the Union’s response to a situation in which the lack of success in this area has increasingly exposed unwelcome external actions in the Balkans. The correlation of the impasse of enlargement with geopolitical rivalry in the region¹ has become more evident, especially in the context of Russian actions. Among them were Russian citizens’ participation in the unsuccessful coup attempt in

¹ See. e.g.: T. Żornaczuk, “Forever on the Periphery? The Return of Geopolitics to the EU Enlargement to the Balkans,” *PISM Policy Paper*, no. 6 (147), February 2016, www.pism.pl.

Montenegro in 2016, just a few months before its accession to NATO, or the involvement of Russia in an attempt to prevent the change of government in Macedonia from the undemocratic one led by Nikola Gruevski, which was revealed in 2017. China's increasing activity in the Balkans is also meaningful in this context. Its economic investments often involve granting loans, translating into increased political dependence. Strengthening the prospect of EU membership is intended to mobilise the Balkan states' governments to resist such external influence.

Increasing the credibility of enlargement policy is also in line with the goal of a stronger Europe in 2025, as expressed in Juncker's State of the Union in September 2017. That is why in the new document the EC presents enlargement as in the political and economic interest of the Union and as a "geostrategic investment" in a stable and united Europe based on common values. The EC, therefore, returns to the approach known from the previous decade, that the Union's involvement in, among other things, carrying out EU institutional reform can be done without prejudice to enlargement.

Old Problems with Enlargement. The Commission recommends that in its support of the Western Balkan countries, the EU focus on six areas: the rule of law, security and migration, the economy, infrastructure, the digital agenda, and reconciliation and good neighbourly relations. It is in response to common challenges in the region, the most important being the rule of law. The document confirms that it is necessary to increase the independence and efficiency of the judicial system, and to fight corruption and organised crime more effectively. On one hand, according to a 2018 Freedom House report, among the candidate countries only Serbia meets the conditions of a free country and the others, only partially. On the other hand, the Transparency International's corruption perception report of February 2018 showed that Montenegro (46/100) achieved a better result than Bulgaria (43), the most corrupt country in the EU. Still, the average standard of the six countries of the Western Balkans (39.5) is far from the EU average (65).

There is consensus in the Union on enlargement to the Balkans, but there is no consensus on the pace. This is signalled by the EC, which explains the distant date of the next enlargement with the need to overcome internal Union challenges. The Visegrad Group of countries or Austria, among others, favour accelerating the integration of the Balkans. However, France and Germany do not lend as strong political support to enlargement as in previous rounds. In turn, for example, Slovenia considers 2025 to be too ambitious for some of the Balkan countries, pointing to the need to resolve bilateral disputes. In fact, these disputes are some of the most important in enlargement policy and are among the remaining challenges indicated in the new document. Apart from numerous border issues or ideological and historical ones, the EC sees the need to sign a legally binding agreement between Serbia and Kosovo. Meanwhile, Macedonia's dispute with Greece over the name of the state also remains unresolved and, as a result, the latter conditions the integration progress of the government in Skopje with regulating this matter.

Perspective. The EC's ambition is to counter the notion of stagnation in enlargement policy. After Serbia began accession negotiations four years ago, the only visible achievement was Bosnia and Herzegovina's February 2016 application for membership of the EU. The date of membership of Montenegro and Serbia and the announcement of the start of accession negotiations with Albania and Macedonia would break this impasse. However, the date of the next EU enlargement, which the Commission sees as ambitious, means in practice a substantial extension of membership negotiations. Montenegro started them in mid-2012 and Serbia at the beginning of 2014. To compare, for Croatia it took less than eight years between the start of negotiations and accession to the EU, and for Slovenia, just a little over six years.

From both the EU institutions and the Member States, enhanced engagement in the enlargement process is needed to truly recover European integration in the Balkans. Poland's influence on certain activities, such as the implementation of the recommendation to start negotiations with Macedonia, remains limited to the option of showing Greece the benefits of sharing the border with a stable neighbour. However, in light of the guidelines from the "enlargement perspective," Poland may consider offering the further transfer of experience to its Balkan partners of such institutions as the Ombudsman or Supreme Audit Office. It can also develop cooperation with the region's countries in reconciliation policy, with the participation of the Krzyżowa Foundation, which was launched in 2017. The support areas defined in the document also may be included in other formats for transferring the Polish experience with European integration, such as the Skopje Conference or Belgrade Conference.

With bilateral disputes being obstacles to the enlargement process, Poland especially should avoid situations in which it could be associated with countries formulating additional conditions on membership. That risk appeared in the past and may return in the context of opening the negotiation chapter on the foreign, security and defence policy of Serbia, given its relations with Russia. These areas are not under a common EU policy and the competences are left to the Member States and intergovernmental coordination. It is worth persuading Serbia, in cooperation with other EU countries, to strengthen Union policy towards third countries, which Montenegro is already doing. However, individual actions that would further condition the integration progress could in fact weaken the effectiveness of Poland's Balkans policy.