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# Promoting peace, stability and investment in the Western Balkans

#Eurmove



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The countries of the Western Balkans and their citizens have proven to be firm believers in the European project. For years, they have worked towards accession to the European Union and undertaking reforms mandated by the EU. In support and to further advance these efforts, there is a need for a sense of shared responsibility in Europe, to enhance stability, security, and cooperation in the region, strengthen democracy and counter nationalistic rhetoric, while boosting economic development and investments.

## **A credible enlargement perspective**

The longer the Western Balkan states are uncertain about their prospects for accession, the more the pro-European democratic forces within the states, and in particular young people will turn their backs on the EU. With wavering EU support among citizens in the Western Balkan region and discrepancies among EU leaders, it is important to maintain a positive enlargement narrative and a proactive and consistent EU involvement in the region, showing citizens and politicians alike in the region that their European trajectory remains on course. While the EU must accelerate the accession process with countries aspiring to join the bloc and showing commitment to undergo the necessary reforms, every accession process must be discussed actively within the framework of a genuine 'Eu-

ropean Public Diplomacy', that includes the voices of civil society, political decision-makers and institutions.

## **Protecting fundamental values, freedoms and rights**

Reliable EU support is crucial for those acting in accordance with the EU's principles underpinning democratic development in the region. Principles such as the freedom of speech, inviolability of borders, acceptance of international law, equality rights and protection of minorities should not be compromised on. With authoritarianism and nationalism in some countries impeding democratic development, the EU should encourage more straightforward and committed reforms to ensure that European values are upheld. In accession negotiations, the chapters concerning the rule of law and democracy should therefore be negotiated as a matter of priority. If necessary, the accession negotiations, or pre-accession assistance, should be frozen and offenders as well as practices named, enabling citizens of the country to understand the reasons. Moreover, support for independent media and investigative journalism in local languages should take a more prominent role.

## **Fighting corruption**

Corruption remains high in the Western Balkans, and combined with a lack of EU engagement, this can enable countries such as Rus-

sia and China to gain foothold in the region. While reducing corruption can make democratic institutions more resilient, it can also increase economic development and improve the socio-economic well-being of the region's citizens. The EU should therefore insist on reforms and better cooperation in the region to fight corruption and organised crime. In order to change the situation of state capture in the Western Balkans, the EU should identify where such state capture exists and name the offending actors in the individual country reports. Last but not least, civil society should be given a strong, independent role in guiding and monitoring the region's long-term anti-corruption efforts.

## **Enhancing security**

While the Western Balkan countries can count on NATO to extend security and stability, the lack of any sustained EU security policy toward the Western Balkans makes the region vulnerable and can play into the hands of countries such as Russia, China, Turkey and the Gulf States. Security sector reforms in the region should be fully in line with international and regional standards. The reforms should go hand in hand with the improvement of efficiency of regional dialogue and cooperation mechanisms on security and defence.

## Boosting the economy and investments

Keeping in mind the overall goal of improving living conditions of citizens and reduce inequalities, there is a clear need for more public investment and funding in the region, especially for less developed parts and weak economies in the region. Considering the low level of economic development of Western Balkan countries overall, the EU could open structural funds to the candidate countries even before membership, with the goal of reaching 2% of individual Western Balkan countries' GDP in the year of their accession to the EU. The EU is the most important trading partner of the Western Balkans, but it also has a large trade deficit with the EU. This should be addressed by assisting (re)industrialisation of the region. To complement the initiatives under the Strategy and Regional Economic Area, the EU and Western Balkan governments could explore possibilities to extend the effects of the internal market by means of concluding bilateral 'Agreements on Conformity Assessment and Acceptance of Industrial Products'.

## Sustainability and environmental protection

Economic growth is not a guarantee of social cohesion and the unequal access to opportunities for citizens remain a challenge. The economic agenda of the region should therefore include policies to reduce inequalities, create qual-

ity employment for all, improve social dialogue and reduce social exclusion. Social partners can be key players in advancing social dialogue and economic governance in all key sectors. At the same time, the Western Balkans are also faced with severe problems on their EU path with regards to energy transition and environmental protection. While economic development in the Western Balkan countries is putting additional strains on the environment, environmental issues are still politically marginalised in the current EU strategy for the Western Balkans. To shape a sustainable environmental future, all the actors in the region need to cooperate with each other and with the neighbouring countries to tackle key challenges such as pollution and health issues, climate change impacts and ecosystem threats. Supported by the EU, policymakers should take swift action towards sustainable development. Investments in the region should support these efforts.

## Improving mobility

Travelling to Europe and access to the labour market are high on the agenda for citizens in the Western Balkan region. A so-called 'Mini-Schengen' initiative for the countries in the region should be complemented by a coherent policy facilitating the free movement of labour, the latter as an instrument potentially supporting both economies and the EU and allowing for a transfer of knowledge

and experience to the region. At the same time, the EU needs to consider the implications of emigration for Western Balkans countries. In dialogue with the Western Balkans governments, the EU should promote circular migration to keep the region's access to expertise in healthcare, education, information-technology and other sectors.

## Promoting civil society

Fundamental improvements are only possible when deeply rooted in society and by taking in all constructive contributions available. To give people in the region a voice in Europe, civil society exchange and cooperation are vital. More effort should therefore be put in facilitating common projects, building networks, and providing capacity-building support and funding. Government and EU support must go hand in hand with transparent decision-making and an open and inclusive dialogue with the participation of citizens. To make EU financial support for civil society in these countries more transparent, accessible and inclusive, a platform could be designed where individual citizens, civil society and businesses can find out for which programs they are eligible. Finally, clearer and more accessible financial support for a wider range of NGOs and civil society initiatives and NGOs and can be reached through simplified administrative requirements.



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