

The future of the Western Balkans is at stake

By Michael Roth

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has been a wake-up call for the EU from its geopolitical slumber. In the midst of the conflict with Putin's Russia, the EU has rediscovered one of its most successful instruments: enlargement policy – which has been a driving force for peace, democracy, rule of law and prosperity in Europe. Now, this success story needs to be continued in Eastern Europe and in the Western Balkans. The return of war to Europe has made clear to us all that the stabilisation and integration of our neighbours to the East and South-East is first and foremost in our own interest. To achieve this, the enlargement process has to be reformed in such a way that the citizens in candidate countries are able to benefit from the initial advantages of EU membership even before formal accession.

The EU has wasted valuable time and a great deal of trust in the Western Balkans over the last few years, most recently by repeatedly postponing the opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. We can no longer afford this lack of determination and unity when the situation is more fragile than it has been in years. Nationalistically motivated tensions in the region are on the rise, as seen most recently at the border between Kosovo and Serbia.

Meanwhile, in the Western Balkans a clash of systems is raging between the liberal democracies in the West and the authoritarian regimes of Russia and China. The hesitation and dithering by the EU has resulted in opening (up) political and economic spaces that other actors have seized, ones who not only reject our values and interests, but actively fight against these. Both states pursue very different strategies in the Western Balkans.

Russia operates as an agitator in order to destabilise the Western Balkans and thus prevent further Western integration of the region. The Kremlin relies above all on its close ties with Serbia and the Serbian-dominated Republika Srpska, one of the two entities of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Putin has demonstrated a keen instinct here, too, when it comes to the ethnic and religious dividing lines that pervade the fragile coexistence in the region. Where the EU seeks to resolve conflicts through mediation and dialogue, Putin tries – directly or through his allies – to add fuel to the nationalist fire.

In contrast, Beijing's aim is to broaden its influence on the Western Balkans by expanding its economic relations, in particular through extensive infrastructure investment as part of the Belt and Road Initiative. And yet the promises made here only rarely end up becoming reality, with many of the projects announced never being realised or making only sluggish progress. There is also a huge question mark over the economic value of these projects if they are financed by Chinese banks and carried out by Chinese companies using Chinese workers and materials. Above all, major projects financed on credit hold great political and economic risks: excessive debts can lead to dangerous dependencies, and in the worst case

to critical infrastructure falling into Chinese hands. The best example of this is the credit-financed motorway construction in Montenegro, which almost resulted in national bankruptcy for the country.

Of the states in the Western Balkans, Serbia is the most open to Russia's and China's overtures. Doubts over the functioning of democracy in the country have justifiably grown under President Aleksandar Vučić. For years, he has pursued a dangerous policy of swinging between the West and Russia and China, with the latter two providing political support primarily on the issue of Kosovo, while also maintaining close ties in economic and security policy. Irrespective of this, two thirds of Serbian exports go to the EU. Since February 24 at the latest it should be clear to the leadership in Belgrade that they need to show where they stand. A country that intends to join the EU cannot permit itself any ambiguity on foreign and security policy.

The EU needs not to shy away from competing with Russia and China if it is able to convincingly communicate to the Western Balkan states that cooperating with liberal democracies is considerably more attractive and sustainable than doing so with authoritarian regimes. A large majority of citizens in the region continue to see their future in the EU – despite all the disappointments and broken promises.

However, what the people and the governments of the region urgently need is concrete progress and benefits of EU accession that are already tangible for them. To achieve this, the accession process needs to be reformed, and candidate countries need to be incorporated step-by-step into EU structures before formally joining the EU. Six specific proposals could pave the way for this:

- Representatives of the candidate countries that make sufficient progress within the framework of the negotiations in terms of democracy, rule of law and good governance should be able to already take part in the European Council and selected Councils of Ministers on a regular basis. This would be adopted by the European Parliament and the Council with a qualified majority on the proposal of the EU Commission;
- Prior to accession, we should cooperate with candidate countries even more closely in the key areas of security, energy and infrastructure, with gradual access to the European single market representing a further attractive incentive on the path into the EU;
- Pre-accession (financial) assistance to support membership efforts should be increased significantly in order to close investment gaps and diminish the attractiveness of Chinese loans;
- When implementing and monitoring EU-financed projects, the role of the predominantly pro-European-minded civil society should be strengthened, for example by means of compulsory consultation procedures;
- EU member states should take on 'sponsorships' for candidate countries, as a means of providing close technical and political support throughout the accession process;

- The opening of formal membership negotiations along with the opening and closing of individual negotiation chapters should in future be decided by a qualified majority in the Council.

These reforms would lead to an incremental accession process, making the long road to membership more attractive and linking the Western Balkan states more closely with the EU, without undermining the strict criteria for accession.

As the largest member state, Germany has a special responsibility for maintaining the inner courtyard of the European house. With the granting of candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova, concerns have grown in the Western Balkans that our focus will shift to Eastern Europe in the near future. It is up to us to ensure that the destabilising influence of Russia and China will not grow further in the region. For this reason, we need to apply our rekindled political will and a reformed process of accession to create the groundwork to enable the next countries from the Western Balkans to join the EU between 2025 and 2030. Let's get to work!

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