

# Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia are close to reaching EU accession standards, but the other Western Balkan states require further reforms

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While Croatia joined the EU in 2013, progress toward the accession of the other non-EU states in the Western Balkans has varied from country to country. [Milenko Petrovic](#) and [Nicholas Ross Smith](#) provide an overview of developments in these states along several dimensions including democracy, economic transition and corruption. They note that Western Balkan states can essentially be split into two groups: Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia, who are close to EU accession standards; and Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo\*, who are still some way off meeting these standards. Nevertheless, they argue that the EU should continue to pursue close engagement with the 'bottom three' to help facilitate their reforms.



On January 21st of this year, accession negotiations between Serbia and the EU officially began, making Serbia, along with Montenegro, the only non-EU Western Balkan countries which have effectively made progress on their journey towards EU membership. While Macedonia, which was accepted as an official candidate in 2005, is still waiting to start official negotiations, the accession prospects for the remaining Western Balkan countries remain uncertain. Nevertheless, the progression of Montenegro and Serbia to a point where they are now tangible candidates for membership shows that the grip of anti-enlargement attitudes amongst EU Member States is perhaps waning.



The anti-enlargement discourse gained a lot of traction in the wake of the EU's mega enlargement of 2004/2007, built on the notions of enlargement fatigue and limited absorption capacity of the Union. This was largely due to the international and European-level financial crises which enveloped the EU from 2008 onwards. However, the negative impacts of the economic crisis, which have predominately affected older EU Member States and had nothing to do with the EU's enlargement to the east, has masked the largely positive effects of enlargement for the EU as whole. Since the EU's economic outlook is beginning to look less cataclysmic, perhaps it is time to seriously re-engage with enlargement, with the Western Balkans unquestionably deserving the greatest attention.



Credit: Jonathan Davis (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

In our recent [article](#) on Croatia's accession and the enlargement agenda in the Western Balkans, we show that the objectively assessed economic and political costs of EU membership for the remaining Western Balkan states are not much different from those of the three latest entrants to the Union – Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia. This becomes even more important when considering the fact that the Western Balkan countries have, from the very beginning, had to endure far stricter accession conditions than their ex-communist counterparts from Central and Eastern Europe, the Baltics or even their Balkan neighbours Bulgaria and Romania.

In this regard, the Western Balkan countries have been required to fulfil additional conditions, as set out in the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP), including post-Yugoslav wars reconciliation and cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY). They also have to meet a tougher version of the Copenhagen criteria for EU membership (i.e. a functioning democracy and free market economy along with the EU *acquis communautaire*). This is a direct consequence of the EU's enlargement fatigue from the mid-2000s.

EU leaders have continued their pro-enlargement rhetoric and repeated reassurances of an "EU future" for all the Western Balkan states. However, policy incentives (and the additional accession conditions) put forward by the EU and its leading Member States to assist them in solving their protracted disputes on statehood (most notably Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and to some extent Macedonia as well) have been more of an additional hindrance than constructive assistance for these states in securing their EU future.

Utilising data from various specialised international NGOs to assess success in post-communist reform, our analysis unequivocally shows that the remaining non-EU Western Balkan countries are generally not too far away from reaching the levels of reform deemed necessary for the accession of Croatia, Bulgaria and Romania. The Table below illustrates this picture, using the average rating of Freedom House's 'Nations in Transit' democracy scores, Transparency International's [Corruption Perception index](#) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development's [Transition report indicators](#) of economic transition.

**Table: Comparison between non-EU Western Balkan states and EU members Bulgaria, Croatia and Romania (2012)**

<i>Country</i>	<i>Population (millions)</i>	<i>GDP (billion \$US)</i>	<i>GDP per capita (\$US)</i>	<i>Economic Transition</i>	<i>Democracy</i>	<i>Corruption Perception</i>
<b>Albania</b>	3.16	28.5	8,866	3.13	4.25	33
<b>Bosnia &amp; He.</b>	3.83	34.1	9,076	2.89	4.39	42
<b>Macedonia</b>	2.11	23.8	11,560	3.26	3.93	43
<b>Montenegro</b>	0.62	8.4	13,431	3.01	3.82	41
<b>Serbia</b>	7.22	86.2	11,886	3.01	3.64	39
<b>Kosovo</b>	1.81	13.6	7,400	-	5.25	34
<b>Bulgaria</b>	7.30	116.4	15,932	3.53	3.18	41
<b>Croatia</b>	4.27	87.6	20,532	3.54	3.61	46
<b>Romania</b>	21.32	352.3	16,517	3.49	3.50	44

**Note:** The economic transition score is calculated using an average of nine indicators from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development's [indicator system](#). This system uses a scale from 1 to 4.33, where the closer a country's average is to 4.33, the closer it is expected to be toward reaching the economic marketisation required for EU accession. The score for democracy is based on Freedom House's 'Nations in Transit' scoring system, which uses a scale from 1 to 7 (7 being the most authoritarian). The corruption perception score is based on Transparency International's [index](#), which uses a scale from 0 to 100 (0 being corrupt, 100 being corrupt free). For the purposes of reading the table, then, a higher value for economic transition and corruption perception is a positive sign, but a higher value for the democracy score is a negative sign. See the authors' [paper](#) for a full explanation of the calculations.

In relation to democracy, human rights, the rule of law and corruption, Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia scored comparatively to Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia from the time of their EU accession (i.e. 2007 and 2013), but the democracy scores for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania and Kosovo have got worse in recent years. With regard to the level of economic development and market liberalisation, Macedonia, Serbia, and Montenegro have already reached comparative levels to Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia (which scored the highest), with Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and particularly Kosovo lagging behind significantly.

Superimposing the identified objective absorption criteria for EU accession on the non-EU Western Balkan countries shows two groups of countries. One, comprising Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia, is seemingly not too far away from reaching the EU's benchmarks and eventual accession. The other, comprising Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, and Kosovo, appears to be some way off from EU accession, requiring further economic and political reform. Although employing a two-track approach could make some sense for the EU, particularly given the gulf in economic and political reform between the two groups, there is little doubt that such an approach would have further negative consequences for the less successful Western Balkan states.

Although Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, and Kosovo require significant economic and political reform, they cannot be left on their own until they 'improve themselves'. As with all previous accession states, the 'bottom three' Western Balkan states will be able to better operate and consolidate their democratic institutions and their economic performance (only) once the accession negotiations with the EU are open and their EU future (together with pre-accession funding) becomes more visible.

We conclude that, due to their very small size, with a population burden of roughly 18 million in total (which is 3 million less than Romania alone), the remaining Western Balkan states do not collectively, and even less so individually, present any noticeable burden for the EU's absorption capacity. The benefits for the EU to enlarge to the Western Balkans, particularly in solidifying stability in the region and extending a zone of peace and prosperity to South East Europe, arguably outweigh the purported costs of accession. Specifically, it is worth the potential risks of a (very slightly) increased lower-paid labour force in the wider EU market and the additional burden from the use of common funds within the EU's budget. Furthermore, for the two 'most troublesome' countries in the region, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo, EU accession is likely the most fruitful and possibly only long-term strategy for successfully addressing their internal problems related to their contested statehoods.

On the other hand, we are aware that even if an objective case can be made for the EU to undertake steps to integrate the remaining Western Balkan countries into the Union right away, the reality is obviously much more complicated and dominated by subjectively defined political issues. The latter, accompanied by the requirements which are unrelated to the Copenhagen criteria or the originally formulated (in the late 1990s/early 2000s) Stabilisation and Association Process criteria for the Western Balkan states, continue to obstruct the pathway towards their EU future.

For Serbia and Kosovo, the EU has emphasised the normalisation of relations between the two. While the signs are positive, it nevertheless remains a delicate issue for all parties involved. This includes the EU, as five of its Member States do not officially recognise Kosovo as a state. For Macedonia, its accession path continues to be blocked by Greece over the use of the name "Macedonia", resulting in an impasse that has so far been difficult for the EU to mediate. Of the remaining countries, only Montenegro seems to have a modestly clearer pathway towards EU accession. Questions of statehood continue to blight Bosnia, while Albania could be left out in the cold altogether due to its inability to genuinely democratise its endemically corrupt political system.

***\*The status of Kosovo as an independent state is disputed.***

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*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor*

of the London School of Economics.

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