



Conference of Speakers of the European Union Parliaments

Vienna, 8 – 9 April 2019

Session I: The European Union and its neighbours

Background Paper

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EU Enlargement Process - Western Balkans/South East Europe

The EU Member States have very close historical, economic and cultural ties with the countries of South East Europe. The EU is also one of the largest investors in the region, helping to secure and create jobs in both South East Europe and the EU.

Consequently, the six countries of South East Europe – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*¹, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia – play an important role in EU foreign policy. Anchoring the future of this region within the European Union is in Europe's security and economic interest.

The primary objective is to support these six states on their path toward becoming an area of stability and democracy and to promote the involvement of the entire region in the European integration process. This is the most effective incentive for driving the domestic reform process in each country forward. The countries of South East Europe themselves set the pace for their integration with the EU through their own reform measures, but are supported in their efforts by the EU.

The summit of heads of state and government in Thessaloniki in June 2003 established concrete prospects for EU accession for the six countries of South East Europe. The Prespa Agreement to change Macedonia's name to the Republic of North Macedonia is a historic step and an example of reconciliation in the Western Balkans.

Accession negotiations with Montenegro have been ongoing since June 2012, with 32 chapters opened and three provisionally closed thus far. Accession negotiations with Serbia began in January 2014. Sixteen chapters have so far been opened and two have been provisionally closed. North Macedonia has had formal candidate status since 2005, and Albania since 2014. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are potential accession candidates.

The decision to open accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania is expected to be taken in June 2019.

The European Commission's renewed commitment and the priorities set by the EU Presidencies of Bulgaria, Austria and Romania have made 2018 and 2019 a window of opportunity for the region.

The European Commission's Western Balkans Strategy of 6 February 2018 contains an action plan with six flagship initiatives targeting specific areas of common interest: Rule of law, security and migration, socio-economic development, transport and energy connectivity, digital agenda, reconciliation and good neighbourly relations. The European Commission has proposed progressively increasing funding within the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance until 2020, inasmuch as reallocation within the current financial framework is allowed, in order to implement the strategy and to support a smooth transition to accession. The strategy also lays out the remaining steps to be taken by Montenegro and Serbia to complete the accession process by 2025.

¹*This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244(1999) and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

The priority agenda of the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Sofia in May 2018 includes enhancing support for the rule of law, promoting socio-economic development and introducing a digital agenda for South East Europe. The Commission has put forward a € 190 million connectivity package.

The Council conclusions on enlargement from 26 June 2018, in which the Council affirmed EU support for the enlargement process and for the European orientation of the Western Balkan countries, constitute a further step.

The Council agreed that it would respond positively to the progress made by North Macedonia and Albania and defined the path forward for potentially opening accession negotiations with both countries in June 2019.

The Berlin Process Summit on 12 July 2018 in London focused on security, economic stability and coming to terms with the past. The London Summit was the fifth meeting of the Berlin Process, an initiative launched by several EU Member States aimed at supporting efforts to strengthen regional cooperation and consequently European integration in the Western Balkans.

The support of the national parliaments and the European Parliament is central to bringing the countries of South East Europe closer to the EU. A panel discussion with representatives from the national parliaments, the European Parliament and the EU Commission took place at the Austrian Parliament at the beginning of October 2018 within the framework of the Parliamentary Dimension of the Austrian Council Presidency. There was agreement on the ongoing need for action on the ground, but also on the obligation of the parliaments of the EU Member States to support the candidate countries in their accession bids.

The pre-accession of the Western Balkans was also a priority agenda item at the Inter-Parliamentary Conference for the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) held in Vienna in October 2018, which also included representatives from Western Balkan countries.

All of the participants underlined the central importance of integrating the candidate countries of South East Europe into the EU for the stability of the region and Europe.

European Neighbourhood Policy

The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was launched in 2004 to promote stability, security and prosperity as well as rule of law and democratic structures in the neighbouring countries of an enlarged EU. This instrument has since gained in importance for shaping the EU's regional and international relations. The ENP comprises ten southern and eastern Mediterranean neighbours and six eastern neighbours: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Belarus, Libya and Syria are not currently fully participating in the ENP.

Union for the Mediterranean

The Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) was established in Paris in 2008 as a continuation of the Barcelona Process begun in 1995. It comprises 43 countries: all EU Member States, Monaco, Arab countries bordering the Mediterranean, including Jordan and Mauritania (but excluding Libya), Israel, Turkey and the Adriatic Balkan countries. Its objective is to promote economic integration and sector-specific cooperation in the region, including Israel.

The UfM focuses on the political stabilisation of the southern Mediterranean and plays an important role as a platform for dialogue and a forum for regional cooperation.

It is the only regional forum outside the United Nations in which Arab states and Israel regularly participate at a working level.

The EU co-presidency is aimed at strengthening UfM complementarity with the ENP and the effectiveness of EU assistance to the Southern Mediterranean.

Parliaments have played a role in the UfM since 1998. In 2003, the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Forum became the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly (EMPA). In March 2004 it was constituted in Athens and in 2010 the name was changed to “Parliamentary Assembly of the Union for the Mediterranean” (PA-UfM).

The PA-UfM comprises 140 parliamentarians from the EU (as well as other European countries) on the one hand, and 140 from all of the EU’s partners on the other, thereby establishing parity between the EU and its partners for a total of 280 parliamentarians from 43 countries. The work of the PA-UfM is prepared in five committees. An annual conference is held once a year in the respective country holding the Presidency.

Eastern Partnership

The Eastern Partnership – which includes Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine – is also part of the European Neighbourhood Policy. It was adopted as a counterpart to the Union for the Mediterranean at the initiative of Poland and Sweden in 2008 and launched at the Prague Summit on 7 May 2009. The main objectives are the political association and further economic integration of the partner countries – without explicit prospects for membership.

Today, the Eastern Partnership is made up, on the one hand, of multilateral meetings – summits, meetings of foreign and ministers, panels, expert meetings – and on the other hand of bilateral meetings based on Association and Partnership Agreements.

EURONEST, the parliamentary dimension of the Eastern Partnership, was established in 2011 and is made up of 60 members of the European Parliament and 10 members each from the national parliaments of the partner countries Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Belarus has not yet participated in EURONEST PA activities for political reasons. However, a separate working group on Belarus was established in 2011 to develop proposals on how EURONEST can assist Belarus in meeting the criteria for admission to EURONEST.

Ukraine is a priority partner of the European Union. On 11 July 2017, the Council adopted, on behalf of the EU, a Decision on the conclusion of the Association Agreement with Ukraine. This final step in the ratification process enabled the full implementation of the agreement from 1 September 2017.

The Association Agreement is the main instrument for rapprochement between Ukraine and the EU. It promotes deeper political relations, stronger economic ties and respect for common values. The deepened and comprehensive free trade area forms the economic part of the agreement, providing Ukraine with a framework for modernising its economy and trade relations.

The EU supports the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the country and sees the full implementation of the Minsk Agreements as the basis for a sustainable political solution to the conflict in the eastern regions of the country.

EU Strategy for the Danube Region

The EU's macro-regional strategies enable countries in the same region – EU Member States and non-member countries alike – to better tap shared potential within a policy framework. One of these four macro-regional strategies is the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, which comprises 14 participating states and about 117 million people.

The kick-off took place at the European Council in June 2009: The European Commission was tasked by the heads of state and government with developing such a strategy, the EU's second macro-regional strategy following the Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, by the end of 2010.

The European Commission produced a strategy paper and a concrete action plan following in-depth exchanges and based on contributions and proposals from states, local authorities and other stakeholders, including non-governmental stakeholders in the region. The Action Plan consists of four pillars: Connecting the Danube Region, protecting the environment in the Danube Region, building prosperity in the Danube Region and strengthening the Danube Region through institutional capacities and cooperation in the field of security.

The four pillars are broken down into 12 priority areas, for which institutions from the participating states assume coordination. The strategy was endorsed by the European Council on 24 June 2011. Romania has held the one-year presidency of the Danube Region Strategy since November 2018. At the annual forum in Sofia in October 2018 the decision was made to green light a revision of the action plan. This action plan is to be presented in June 2019 and adopted in September.

In 2015 the Danube Strategy Point was established in Brussels in order to support the Danube Region Strategy. The Danube Strategy Point is the central point of contact for assisting the core actors in the Danube region, especially the national and thematic coordinators. Its remit also includes strengthening the implementation structures through concrete steps and increasing the visibility of the diverse activities in the Danube region. In July 2018, the Danube Strategy Point was awarded to Vienna and Bucharest following a call for tenders within the framework of a project.

Discussion points

- What further measures can national parliaments take to support the implementation of reforms in the countries of the Western Balkans/South East Europe and to strengthen a sustainable pro-European orientation?
- How can national parliaments become more involved in the EU's macro-regional strategies?