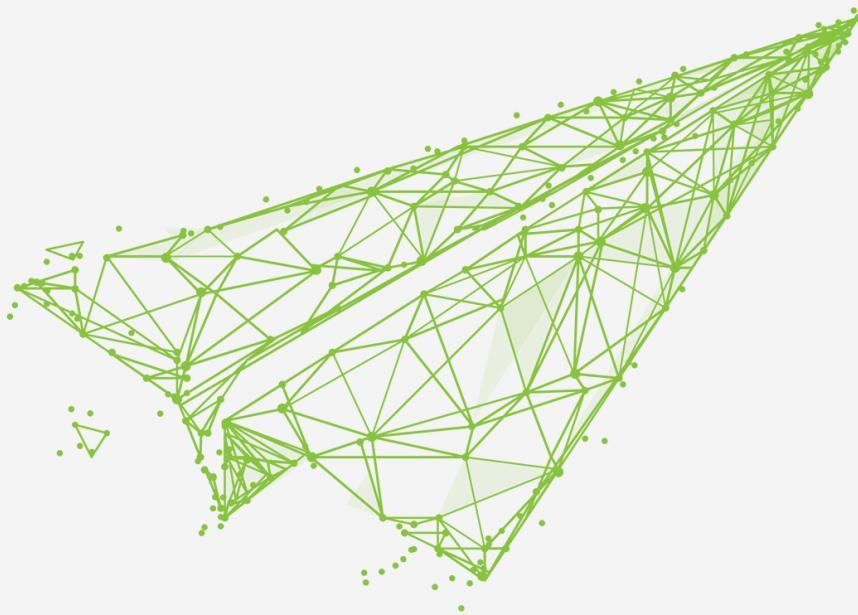


The EU Institutions and Policies after 2024 Elections: How to Advance in the Western Balkans Accession?



June 2024

Introduction

The June 2024 EU elections hold significant implications for the Western Balkans (WB), a region whose political and economic stability is closely entwined with European integration. The new composition of the EU Parliament will lead to changes within the political dynamics of its structures, including the appointment of the next European College of Commissioners. Thus, countries of the WB are attentively observing the shifts in policies and priorities that could influence their accession prospects, regional cooperation and stability, and reform agendas. This election cycle could either invigorate the enlargement process or introduce new challenges, making it imperative to explore the possible impacts and strategic responses for the WB in this evolving context.

Impact of EU elections on the WB enlargement strategy: a more complex and expanded enlargement policy with the Trio included

The real impact of far-right parties is felt most acutely when their narratives and policies become mainstream. Therefore, it is crucial that large political party families such as EPP assume a responsibility to safeguard the processes that protect and promote European values. Well-established political groups can act as bulwarks against the negative impact of the far right, no matter the gains the latter makes, depending on whom they align with in the coming weeks and months. This is why explicit signals such as the letter addressed to Ursula von der Leyen conditioning their support for her re-election by refusing any sort of cooperation with hard right[1] are more than welcome.

The stance of newly elected MEPs on enlargement will influence legislative backing for accession, set the pace and terms of the integration process and decide the distribution of resources and political support. Enlargement has become increasingly complex with the expansion from six to nine countries, now incorporating the Trio countries of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, alongside the Western Balkans. There is a risk that due to geopolitical emphasis on the Eastern Trio, the WB might drop even further from the list of priorities. This requires new strategic thinking and implies that there is a more complex interplay of actors, conditioning each country's path.

Impact on liberal ideas: the region's deteriorating democracy and increasing authoritarian tendencies

While the EU's efforts to revive enlargement prospects are acknowledged, its credibility in the region has recently declined. This decline is due to issues such as the use of vetoes, a lack of clarity in addressing bilateral disputes, asymmetric approaches and frequent ambiguities. A recent poll has shown a decreasing trend in trust in a European perspective in numerous countries, with Serbia having the lowest rate, with only 40% of citizens believing in EU membership, while the highest rate belongs to Albania with 92 %.[2] The recent election results in North Macedonia and Serbia have led to the realization of fears over growing authoritarian and autocratic tendencies in the WB6 governments. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, concerns are high regarding the unconstitutional and separatist behavior and the shrinking space for media and CSOs, in particular within the autocratic regime of the Republika Srpska entity.

[1] Euractiv, Grieria M., "EU Socialists, Greens, Liberals warn von der Leyen: Not to hard-right alliance", May 2024. Via: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/elections/news/eu-socialists-greens-liberals-warn-von-der-leyen-no-to-hard-right-alliance>

[2] International Republican Institute, Western Balkans Regional Poll, April 2024. Via: <https://www.iri.org/resources/western-balkans-regional-poll-february-march-2024-mini>

Additionally, the normalization process between Kosovo and Serbia remains at a standstill, with persistent security issues in northern Kosovo. Moreover, pressure on civil society and overall state capture persist in numerous countries of the region. Regrettably, hate speech, secessionist narratives and the obstruction or slowdown of institutional operations are consistently escalating in most countries across the region. These tendencies are a real danger for EU perspectives in the region and enable third parties (e.g. Russia, China and Turkey) and even some EU member states to be more impactful with their malign policies and influences. The new EU institutions should put in serious efforts to prevent further deterioration of weak democratic institutions and urgently support pro-European ideas and actors.

Recommendations:

- **The EU should prioritize the integration of the WB6 as a matter of security.** This would be crucial to ensure peace, economic stability and human security in the current geopolitical climate of the region. Such prioritization would include the **EP's consistent engagement with WB candidate countries** with clear and transparent communication regarding accession criteria and expectations. Moreover, this requires the **EU to apply more stringent conditionality, emphasizing adherence to democratic principles, the rule of law and respect for human rights as non-negotiable conditions for accession. Appointing a credible and impactful European Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement is crucial.** This would ensure the support of a staunch advocate for the rule of law and enlargement who recognizes the political significance of WB integration while ensuring a merit-based process. Ideally, the Commissioner should be from a member state that recognizes Kosovo's statehood and one that does not have bilateral dispute(s) with any of the WB6 states.
- The **EU institutions should** apply mechanisms such as platforms, grants and regular exchange opportunities to **facilitate the transfer and circulation of expertise, experience and networks between the WB and the Eastern Trio** in their shared EU path. It is equally vital that **EU supports critically oriented WB CSOs and streamlines their engagement at the EU level.**^[3] Simultaneously, the EU institutions should **require more transparency and accountability from the WB governments.** This should ideally be linked to existing mechanisms, particularly funding instruments, such as up to €6 billion support via the **Growth Plan** for increasing the region's preparedness for membership. Furthermore, the EC and the national governments in the WB states should provide an **enabling environment for public dialogue on implementing and revising Reform Agendas.**
- The **EU should commit to restoring its credibility,** which has been damaged by bilateral disputes among candidate countries and member states that are largely unrelated to the integration process. Additionally, the EU needs **to intensify its efforts to resolve ongoing political disputes in the region** and demonstrate greater resolve **in addressing hegemonic regional policies and the rise of authoritarianism** in several WB countries. Given the dynamic geopolitical shifts, **resolving disputes between Kosovo and Serbia remains an urgent priority.**

[3] Good example is the EESC initiative <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/initiatives/enlargement-candidate-members-initiative>