



# Western Balkans' Accession to the European Union: Mission (Im)Possible

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## About this project

After the successful research projects “Bulgaria in Europe and the World” and “Europe Looks to the East: The Eastern Partnership One Year Later”, the Centre for European and International Studies (CEIS), together with the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Bulgaria and Kristian Vigenin, MEP and Head of the PES Western Balkans Task Force, launched “Western Balkans’ Accession to the European Union: Mission (Im)Possible”.

The goal of this project was to give the opportunity to students and young professionals to research the long process of accession of the Western Balkans to the European Union. We chose to research this specific topic, because often our politicians are tangled in petty domestic issues or deliver grand speeches on global problems, but we rarely hear them discuss the relations with our closest neighbors. Apart from the clichés that Bulgaria support European Union (EU) enlargement with the Western Balkans if and when they met the membership criteria, we, the citizens, do not see any targeted discussions on the matter.

That is why we decided to invite young people interested in the topic to deliver their opinions. They were asked to summarize the results of the accession process on one hand and on the other hand, to analyze the challenges lying ahead and give their views on the possible future developments. We also decided to think about and come up with ideas about Bulgaria’s place in the process.

After a very competitive selection procedure, we chose 20 students and young professionals in the field of foreign policy and international relations. Participants were divided in four groups: political cooperation, economic cooperation, trans-border issues and Bulgaria’s place in the process. With the help of the CEIS team

and some valued specialists, they heard and researched the official positions of the parties involved, discussed the challenges and the opportunities, and came up with some creative solutions to speed up the process of Western Balkans progress towards accession.

We are proud to present this a short summary of their hard work.

*Kalina Panayotova*

*CEIS President*

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*CEIS Board Member*

## **Democracy, stability, human rights: Political aspects of EU integration**

The turbulent history of the region is the reason why the EU defines as its main priority the preservation of peace, democracy, good governance and stability, on which basis each country builds its political and economic life. Monitoring the political climate which main characteristics are good governance, political stability and effective dialogue between the institutions within each country is extremely important for the future of the region as a whole.

The principle of **good governance** of EU is described in the so-called White Paper which points out the most distinguishing characteristics of the term: openness, transparency in the process of decision making, political responsibility of the ruling governments, effectiveness of the administrative capacity.

The principles of liberal democracy including the separation of powers are constitutionally enshrined in separate fundamental laws, adopted by each of the Western Balkan countries. This means that henceforth a significant part of the responsibility for the future political process in these countries lies within political elites and administration which implements the constitutional acts and the decisions made.

The first problematic field in the institutional picture of the Western Balkan countries is the shortage of highly qualified employees within the public administration to correspond adequately to the requirements for synchronization of the administration functions with European norms and models. Secondly, in the process of decentralization and transferring more power to local authorities, there are many obstacles and challenges that prevent this process from deepening and full implementation. Although it is enshrined constitutionally, the local government requires a series of additional measures to ensure its proper and independent functioning.

It should be also emphasized that the Parliament is constitutionally regulated as a supreme institution in most of the countries,

but in practice, its powers are formal and limited. It is necessary to strengthen the role of the Parliament in the internal and external processes, in the national and foreign affairs which means to strengthen the control over the executive power by the legislature.

The establishment of the institution of the ombudsman in each country is a positive trend and can be seen as an important and necessary step towards a democratic constitutional state and a prerequisite for good governance.

Here, it should be mentioned that the wide ranging organized crime and its links with the structures of power and political elites are a bad “symptom” of any governance of law and seriously impede the progress of the countries. This “symptom” and its penetration in various spheres of public and political life are linked to the lack of statehood and poor or even severe economic situation.

The **civil society** (CS) activities are another key feature of democracy and are essential for the promotion and respect for human rights and building the rule of law. CS organizations can help the process of achieving increased political accountability as well as promoting public discussion of important political, economic and social issues which to improve the quality of reforms in these areas.

Although there is a reported improvement of the capacity and positions of the CS for monitoring and evaluation of the government in each country, its influence is still weak and regular consultations with its representatives in the legislative process are lacking. In this regard, in its progress reports the European Commission (EC) makes recommendations for improving the social and economic dialogue between the CS and the authorities at national, regional and local level.

Inextricably linked to civil activity is the conduct of **free and fair elections**, which is another main criterion for the development and state of the democracy in each country. To ensure stability and respect for the rule of law, it is necessary that elections be held according to the relevant international and European standards. The elections held in the recent years in different countries of the region are generally carried out in accordance with the international stand-

ards as on the one hand there has been considerable progress in the inclusion of various communities to vote, but on the other hand, there are still registered cases of using excessive violence and pressure on citizens during election time, which does not respond to the criteria for democracy.

The **reform of the judicial system** is on the one hand, one of the most delicate political criteria that should be met by potential candidates for EU membership, and in addition, it is a prerequisite for ensuring the rule of law as one of the defining values in the EU.

Regarding the judicial reform in the countries of the Western Balkans it is important to note that its conduct requires both legislative and institutional changes. The European Commission most frequently calls for judicial efficiency and warns against non-transparent and unmotivated decisions for appointments of judges and prosecutors and their independence, as well as against the inadequate access to justice.

The recommendations and criticisms of the EC shows that in the first place the Western Balkan countries need a comprehensive, integrated and coordinated strategy to reform their judicial systems. Many of these countries (Croatia, Albania, and Montenegro) have recorded substantial progress in this direction. But despite some successful steps, however, a weakness remains the incomplete reforms and the lack of tangible and real results.

Because of the demographic complexity and the historical turmoil in the region of Western Balkans, the issues related to the **ethnic and interethnic relations, minority rights and those of the refugees** are of critical importance, having in mind that the denial of fundamental rights and freedoms means gross violation of the democratic values.

There is an evident need for better tools to protect minorities in this group of countries. In the first place, the essential requirements regarding the protection of minorities should be clearly determined for all candidate countries. Secondly, we should mention the control over the implementation of the national laws in this problematic

field. Thirdly, it is important that protective mechanisms for sub-national minorities be established and that international instruments for protection against discrimination on racial, ethnic, tribal, religious or other grounds be implemented. And last but not least - we need a greater uniformity of standards for minorities' protection in Europe, which certainly would alleviate their situation.

Not less significant and tangible are the problems related to the status of refugees. In times of war, local conflicts and border disputes, Europe should pay serious attention to the refugee waves and displacement of innocents. The recommendations of the EP are for promoting integration by reducing inter-ethnic tensions and eliminating the segregation through educational programs which emphasize on the main European principles and rights.

It is an approved opinion that one of the pillars of the democracy is the **freedom of media and speech**. The challenges facing all countries in the region include the intimidation of journalists, political pressure, corruption in the form of "custom-made" articles and reports, illegal state subsidies to government-controlled media. There is lack of transparency regarding the ownership of major media groups and as a result there is blending of political, economic and corporate interests. So the space for serious discussion on important topics is reduced below the minimum health and leads to outright and intentional profanation of the fourth power.

## **Economic integration of the Western Balkans to the European Union: Responsibilities and opportunities**

An indispensable part of the process of accession of the Western Balkans to the European Union is the economic integration. It is the economic issues and criteria that are amongst the most important ones when acceding to the Union, especially in the light of the recent financial and economic crisis and its aftermath.

The economic crisis seriously affected the Western Balkan countries and their economic indexes aggravated rapidly because of their openness to the foreign markets. Before the crisis the Western Balkan economies were experiencing economic growth of 5-6% a year, and now they need to target their efforts not only to retrieve this growth but also achieve a sustainable one.

Among the main issues to be tackled by the Western Balkan countries in the process of their economic European integration are issues like the extremely **high levels of unemployment**, reaching to 40-50% in countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. The weak competitiveness of the local economies, supplemented to the scanty internal consumption and the high debt levels are the key economic problems to be dealt with. One of the best incentives to overcome those challenges is to stimulate internal consumption and utilize to the highest extent the funds allocated for the region.

Another big challenge for the region is the **introduction of the euro** as an official currency whenever they join the EU. Even though some of the countries now use it as an official currency like Kosovo and Montenegro, and some have currency boards tied to the euro like Bosnia and Herzegovina, there is a lot to be done before they are allowed to join the Monetary Union.

The recent developments with some of the member-states and their inability to cope with the crisis and provide correct statistical information poses the grave question of how prepared countries are and how trustworthy the data they present to the Commission is. None of the Western Balkan countries has succeeded in fulfilling the EU requirements in this field, which makes the issue even more severe.

But it is not only the case of incorrect **statistical data** that the countries in the region need to take care before they can integrate to the EU. The difficult questions of fighting unemployment, high debt levels, permanent trade imbalances and weak competitiveness all remain open and pressing.

On the other hand, the idea of dividing the euro-zone into two separate zones might prove useful – the 'Northern' one, comprising

the core countries, those with the strong currency and competitive economies; and the ‘Southern’ euro-zone, consisting of the peripheral states. Perhaps it is a wise idea for the Western Balkans to accede to the ‘Southern euro-zone’. That will allow for them to devalue their national currencies so they could reach competitive advantages for their exports and faster restructure economies.

Another key aspect of the economic integration of the region is the **energy security on the Western Balkans**. It means ensuring energy sufficiency enough to meet the demand, achieving ecological sustainability and creation of preconditions for incessancy of energy supplies. The development of energy capacity of the region able to satisfy the growing demand, is a major challenge and a key element in the process of integrating into the European Energy System.

The sufficiency of energy supply can be ensured by creating inter-connectors (between Serbia and Bulgaria, for instance), developing the Ionian-Atlantic pipeline, a part of the Western Balkans Gas Ring, and also by building regasification terminals for liquid gas, like the ones in Croatia and Albania. The creation of gas depots and the reconstruction of the existing power plants accompanied by investments in intelligent electric distribution networks will add to ensuring reliable energy infrastructure.

A big issue that also has to be taken into account is the transition to green energy. The Balkan Peninsula is rich in waters and other renewable resources. That constitutes a great opportunity for the countries to develop various renewable energy projects and get their energy policy and infrastructure integrated to the European one long before they become member-states. They can be assisted in this task by various initiatives and instruments like the 9,2 bln. euro envisaged for water resources, water power plants, and renewable energy projects within the new mandate of the European Investment Bank.

The economic integration of the region will also be supported by the development of the **transport infrastructure**. Well developed transport infrastructure has always been a prerequisite for economic growth and sustainable development. The region has a full potential

to do so especially since four out of the ten main European transport corridors stretch through it. There should be a special emphasis on developing those corridors that would ensure not only the easy and free movement of goods and people, but will also stimulate tourism and investment in the local economies.

Special attention has to be paid to the development of the railway networks and railway connectivity among the Western Balkan countries. So far the level of railway connectivity has been gravely unsatisfactory and a lot needs to be done. There are 16 new projects for railway networks developed and waiting to be realized.

The potential of the intermodal connections has not been fully used as the level of intermodal stations and ports is very low. The standstill in the development of intermodal transport connections and the infrastructure projects needs to be dealt with at the shortest notice.

Nevertheless, there are some serious disproportions in the **regional development** of the Western Balkans, especially compared to the EU and its old member-states. The levels of economic development are so varied that they differ to more than 13:1 from the least developed regions of the Western Balkans to the most developed EU regions. This might alter the allocation of funds under the Structural and Cohesion Fund with the emphasis put on the Western Balkans as a the whole. It means allocating less funds to the other less developed EU regions and thus add to increasing the gap between the EU regions in terms of regional development.

On the other hand, a powerful tool for advancing the economic and regional development is the use of the Pre-accession funds available to each country in the integration process. Pre-accession funds have proved to be effective in building capacity in the public administration to cope with the issues of the internal market, the accession to the Union and the related responsibilities and obligations. They are also efficient in harmonizing the countries' legislation with the *acquis communautaire*, and improving the infrastructure and competitiveness of the economies.

The Pre-accession funds along with other specifically aimed at

the Western Balkans financial instruments are to be effectively used in order to achieve greater economic development and integration of the region to the European Union. With their help and the foreign investments in the Western Balkans tens of billions of Euro will be invested in the region thus bringing it a lot closer to the Union in terms of economic and regional development.

Upon acceding to the EU the Western Balkan countries will have at their disposal the funds from the Structural and the Cohesion Fund to support their development. The question is though, if their economic and regional development remains relatively the same at the time of their accession, what will happen to the allocation of funds within the Union. Probably, the emphasis of the cohesion funds will be put on the Western Balkan regions since they will be the least developed. That might, on the other hand, leave some of the now least developed regions with less funds than needed to ensure their equal development. In this case, perhaps it is worth thinking about developing transnational but at the same time still sectoral operational programmes aimed at developing certain sectors throughout the whole of the region. That will ensure not limiting the effects of the funds just to the country borders but will help convey the results to a far greater scale and encompass the whole of the region with uniform actions aimed at further and more efficient development it in order to level with the average European economic and regional development standards.

## **Overcoming Borders: Conflict resolution and establishment of good neighborly relations in the Western Balkans**

The Balkans are a region with a lot of meaning to the European Union. They are a cradle of Western civilization and yet are called the powder keg of Europe. Southeast Europe has attracted people since the ancient times due to its favorable geographic features and

economic opportunities. It has always been a ground for co-existence of different culture, religions and peoples over a small territory. The course of history and current political processes have shaped the Western Balkans as a multicultural and multiethnic conflict zone.

We can outline several major reasons for the current state of play: the break-up of Former Yugoslavia; the sensitive issue of Kosovo's autonomy; the rise of nationalism lined with anti-neighbors propaganda; the existence of paternalistic parties, defending the interests of ethnic groups rather than states thus dividing society on religious or ethnic grounds rather than unifying states; double standards from the international community.

These factors gave rise to four types of present-day conflicts: bilateral border issues, ethno – religious conflicts, cultural and historical tensions and legal disputes. At the same time, each conflict usually turns to be many-sided making its resolution complicated and versatile.

**Border issues** that exist in the Western Balkans, such as the disputes between Serbia and Croatia on the Danube border, between Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina on the Drina border, and the Kosovo-Macedonia border dispute, hardly infringe vital interests of the states involved and a quick resolution will be of interest of all parties. Possible solutions to these issues include their referral to the International Court of Justice, or arranging bilateral package deals with mutual concessions. There is also room for the multilateral approach in the framework of Regional Cooperation Council.

**Ethno-religious conflicts** are at their core social conflicts. Therefore economic cooperation could play a vital role in their resolution. Alongside, the Western Balkans may consider the establishment of a supranational system for monitoring the problems ethnic minorities, raising awareness on conflict resolution and providing solutions. Furthermore, following the example of the Mo Ibrahim Prize for Achievement in African Leadership and the Nobel Award, the states involved could set up a fund to provide annual monetary award and a pension to responsible politicians from the region

with contributions for minority integration, strengthening democracy and good neighborly relations. This would provide a good financial stimulus for the politicians to act responsibly and break existing ties between political elites and organized crime in the region.

To tackle **cultural and historical disputes** we recommend deeper cooperation between the Western Balkan states in education, science, economy, security and culture with the active financial and administrative participation of the EU in the process. Establishing international scientific centers, researching the cultural and historical heritage of the Western Balkans – languages, customs, religions, history, arts, etc., conducting seminars and round tables, organizing ethno-festivals for dances, folklore music and art, and promoting activities of the civil society would help to distinguish similarities and differences between the Balkan states and help boosting communication between people and lowering the tension between the states in the region. This may also result in positive economic effect.

Last but not least, we have paid attention to **two of the most pressing conflicts in the region**: the name issue of Macedonia and the recognition of Kosovo. We believe that there are three ways to resolve the matter. One is to accept the name Macedonia, which will meet serious opposition from Greece and even if the EU intervenes, the Greeks would not give in easily. Another option is to agree on the name Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, which people from Macedonia consider offensive. A third way out could be the adoption of the name Northern Macedonia, which has already received approval by U.S. and EU representatives. Regardless of the way chosen, it is clear that the resolution would require compromises on both sides.

With regards to the Kosovo issue, given the clashing positions of the newly formed state, which insists on its right of self-determination, and of Serbia, which views Kosovo as cradle of its nation, we consider bilateral resolution of the conflict to be the best possible option. The opinion of the International Court can only become a framework for such discussion.

Efforts are needed to resolve the political issues that spurred from the Dayton agreement, because nostalgia, hate and prejudice are still a major obstacle before the peaceful co-existence of people of the Western Balkans.

## **The implications of the integration process of the Western Balkans into EU for Bulgaria**

Four demarcations could be made when it comes to the foreign political relations between Bulgaria and the Western Balkans: *political, economic, security and civil society*.

What is needed is a conceptual basis for the forming of relevant strategies of Bulgaria's involvement in the process of Western Balkans' integration into EU through the analysis of the potential benefits and threats of the enlargement itself.

The **specifics of Bulgaria's accession** should be thoroughly analyzed in order to understand the institutional (-state) building and the implementation of the democratic values in the region. The threat for delaying Bulgaria's accession to EU was positive for making reforms. However, EU should take into account the peculiarities of the political culture and nations' characteristics as far as Western Balkans are concerned. Bulgarian political elite is familiar with the structure of the Balkans political systems as there are many features in common and this could be very useful within the integration process. On the contrary, overintervention may provoke recoil that may appear a problem in a future perspective, after the accession of the Western Balkan countries and the influence they would have in the European institutions. Whilst on European scene there is a debate about the integration direction – enlargement (horizontally) or deepening (vertically) of the integration, Bulgaria should strongly push the Balkan issue on the EU's political agenda persistently.

**Security** is a preparative indicator for development. Bulgaria should foster regional security cooperation and further institutionalization in the framework of NATO as stable Balkans as a whole would raise the level of each nation, including Bulgaria. The major problems of security require amplification of the classic understanding of security. Along with the asymmetric threats we should consider fight against corruption and organized crime, demographic issues, media freedom and transparency, the illegal traffic of humans, drugs and weapons. Successful forms of regional security cooperation have been established and strategies conducted albeit more is desired.

The regional security complex is attracted by the European security complex as EU is the major peacekeeping and peacebuilding subject in the Balkans. For the time being, the Bulgarian political elite is united about the issue of the European perspective of the Balkan countries. More integration means more resolved conflicts. Furthermore, an eventual accession of the region would result in Bulgaria having only one border (Black sea and Turkey – yet until its accession) and would lower the risk of trans-border crime and enrich economic cooperation.

Integration means also expanding the European market. Bulgaria may benefit from the trade liberalization and the common market however threats may be identified. Active economic Bulgarian foreign policy within the region would foster “intensive europeization” of the **Balkan economic cooperation**. Bulgaria’s export of goods and services for the region is growing though the economic and financial crisis as an obstacle for optimizing trade is the bad infrastructure. Additional stimulus for the regional economy is seen into shared expenses and investments into common advertisement strategy, aiming at the creation of a **united touristic vision** for the destination of the Balkans.

As far as **civil society** is concerned, Bulgaria has already created a model of the functioning of the civil society sector. Transnational and multilateral projects of NGOs should be financed by the EU as a specific fund for NGOs is advised to be established.

## List of participants

### **“Democracy, good governance, stability and human rights: Political Challenges for accession”**

Miroslava Gateva  
Polina Simeonova  
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### **“Overcoming borders: settling bilateral conflicts and promoting good neighborly relations”**

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Petya Radulova  
Pavel Petrov  
Anton Kondov  
Olga Ignatova  
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### **“Economic integration of the region – opportunities and responsibilities”**

Ivaylo Tzonev  
Ilina Dimitrova  
Maria Georgieva  
Albena Petkova  
Vladimir Mitev  
Milen Savov

### **“Bulgaria: New opportunities and potential threats of Western Balkan accession to the EU”**

Teodor Slavev  
Vasil Vasilev  
Violeta Pencheva  
Ivo Iliev  
Aleko Stoyanov  
Anelia Ivanova

## About CEIS

In 2008 a group of young people, united by their interests in the field of international relations and their common aspirations to work together for a better future of Bulgaria, established the Centre for European and International Studies (CEIS).

We believe that we can come up with good ideas for Bulgaria's foreign policy so that our country can become a modern democratic European player on the international stage. It is important for us that our country becomes a factor in the international relations and that is why we want to give our best to encourage good neighborly relations based on fairness, mutual recognition of interests and peaceful conflict resolution.

We are willing to work to promote European democratic and social values in Bulgaria to ensure its fully-fledged and equal membership in the European Union.

We try to engage the active thoughtful and knowledgeable young people in our research projects because we believe that it is our responsibility to give them a chance to explore the field of their interests and to think out of the box.

Apart from the research projects "Bulgaria in Europe and the World", "Europe Looks to the East: The Eastern Partnership One Year Later", and "Western Balkans' Accession to the European Union: Mission (Im)Possible", we award annual scholarship to a student based on an essay dedicated to a pressing European issue.

You can find out more at [www.cemi-bg.org](http://www.cemi-bg.org) or by writing to [office@cemi-bg.org](mailto:office@cemi-bg.org).

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