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The Western Balkans on its path to the European Union

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The Western Balkans on its path to the European Union

Abstract: EU membership has been a compelling goal for the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia), related to the bloc's stability, economic prosperity and higher standard of living. Each of these countries pursues its own process of EU accession while being also a part of the regional initiatives under the auspices of the EU. This paper provides an overview of the EU accession process of the Western Balkan countries, focusing on their individual achievements and challenges, as well as common features and problems. Also, the content and prospects of regional integration of the Western Balkans through the Regional Economic Area (REA) programme, along with the role of the EU in supporting the regional perspective are discussed. The parallel Western Balkans engagement in both processes supports arguments for the prioritisation of the individual countries' accession to the EU over Western Balkans regional integration, distinguishing also the challenges of both processes. The methodology for the elaboration of this paper includes methods of analysis and synthesis, based on extensive desk research of available materials.

Keywords: Western Balkans, EU, EU accession, regional integration

1 Introduction

● All Western Balkans countries relate their future to the European Union. Each of the countries faces specific challenges on its path, while common problems have also been detected, as well as regional initiatives aiming to assist the region with regard to certain issues. These topics are addressed below, with particular attention paid to the discussion about the parallelism of both processes (EU accession versus/or along with regional integration) and further prospects of EU accession for the Western Balkans.

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2 Progress of Western Balkan countries in their EU accession process

The Western Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia) have been on the EU agenda for more than 15 years¹. The region's first promising event is considered to have been the EU-Western Balkans summit held in Thessaloniki, Greece, on June 21, 2003². The main conclusions of the summit are included in the following statements³:

1. The EU reiterates its unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries. The future of the Balkans is within the European Union;
2. Organised crime and corruption are real obstacles to democratic stability, the rule of law, economic development, and the development of civil society in the region and are a source of grave concern to the EU;
3. The EU visa-liberalisation process toward the Western Balkans is dependent on implementing major reforms in areas such as strengthening the rule of law, combating organised crime, corruption and illegal migration, and strengthening administrative capacity in border control and security of documents.

In Thessaloniki, the EU leaders agreed to meet periodically within the framework of an EU-Western Balkan forum in order to discuss issues of common concern, review the progress of the countries of the region in their road to Europe, and exchange views on major developments in the EU⁴. A similar forum, purely devoted to EU integration of the Western Balkans was held 15 years later. Between the two summits, numerous bilateral meetings (EU-Western Balkan countries) were held, as well as several regional initiatives launched. However, the dynamics of the EU engagement with the Western Balkans has not been the same over the years. After serious EU engagement

- 1 Kosovo declared independence from Serbia in 2008. Kosovo's designation is without prejudice to the member states' positions on its status and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.
- 2 European Commission Press Release, *Eu-Western Balkans Summit Thessaloniki*, 21.06.2003, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_PRES-03-163_en.htm [02.10.2019].
- 3 Ibidem.
- 4 S. Mojsovska, *Политиката на ЕУ кон Западниот Балкан: несомнена поддршка и анемичен процес на евроинтеграции* [Politikata na EU kon Zapadniot Balkan: nesomnena poddrška i anemičen proces na evrointegracii], „Respublica“ 2017, <http://respublica.edu.mk/blog/2017-03-22-11-09-24> [14.10.2019].

at the start of the 21st century, the EU's focus on the region has been re-established only recently.

The 2nd EU-Western Balkans summit was held in Sofia on May 17, 2017. The Sofia Declaration comprises the following conclusions⁵:

1. Recalling the Thessaloniki summit of 2003, the EU reaffirms its unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans. Building on the progress achieved so far, the Western Balkan partners have recommitted to the European perspective as their firm strategic choice, to reinforce their efforts and mutual support. The credibility of these efforts depends on clear public communication;

2. The EU welcomes the Western Balkan partners' commitment to the primacy of democracy and the rule of law, especially the fight against corruption and organised crime, good governance, as well as respect for human rights and the rights of persons belonging to minorities. Effective implementation of reforms rests on these foundations. Civil society and independent media play a crucial role in the process of democratisation.

Apparently, the narrative in the summits' conclusions had not changed in nearly 15 years. However, there have been certain developments concerning the region. The possibility of a visa regime with the EU Schengen area has been removed, with the exception of Kosovo. A general overview of the individual progress of the region's countries is summarized in Table 1.

With regard to the discussion of the Western Balkans' integration with the EU, it should be noted that Croatia was part of the Western Balkan group until 2013. In the period between the summits, it was the only country from the Western Balkans to become a member of the Union. Croatia submitted its application for EU membership in 2003, received candidate status in 2004, and started negotiations with the EU in 2005. It entered the Union on July 1, 2013.

Regarding the other countries, Montenegro and Serbia achieved notable progress in a short(er) period compared to the other countries. Currently, only these two countries are in the process of negotiations with the EU; North Macedonia and Albania are candidate

5 Council of the European Union, *Sofia Declaration*, 17.05.2018, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/34776/sofia-declaration_en.pdf [02.12.2019].

Table 1. The EU accession process of the Western Balkans

Country	Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA)	Application for EU membership	Obtained status as an EU candidate country	Liberalization of the EU (Schengen) visa regime towards the country	Start of negotiations for EU membership
Republic of North Macedonia	2004	2004	2005	2009	n/a
Albania	2009	2009	2014	2010	n/a
Montenegro	2010	2008	2010	2009	2012
Serbia	2013	2009	2012	2009	2014
Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H)	2015	2016	n/a	2010	n/a
Kosovo	2016	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a

Source: S. Mojsovska, *Политиката на ЕУ кон Западниот Балкан: несомнена поддршка и анемичен процес на евроинтеграции*, „Respublica” 2017, <http://respublica.edu.mk/blog/2017-03-22-11-09-24> [14.10.2019].

countries, while Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are potential candidate countries.

Montenegro started negotiations with the EU in 2012, and by April 2019 (EU Commission reporting period), 32 chapters out of 35 had been opened, but only three chapters have been provisionally closed (completed)⁶. Although Montenegro does not face barriers in the process of EU integration related to third parties (disputes with other countries on a particular issue), it, nevertheless, faced a serious political crisis prior to the parliamentary elections in 2016. According to the latest EU ‘Country Progress Report’ (2019), the situation has not improved sufficiently. As stated in the report: ‘The political scene remains fragmented, polarised and marked by a lack of genuine political dialogue. Limited progress was made in re-establishing the political dialogue in parliament in the course of 2018 with the temporary and partial return of a majority of the opposition parties to parliament and the establishment of the temporary parliamentary committee’. In addition, it says: ‘Progress towards meeting the interim benchmarks set

6 European Commission, *Montenegro 2019 Report*, 2019, <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20190529-montenegro-report.pdf> [02.12.2019], p. 3.

in the rule of law chapters 23 and 24⁷ will be key for further progress in the negotiations overall⁸.

Serbia started its negotiations in 2014, and by April 2019 (EU Commission reporting period), had opened 16 chapters, out of which two have been provisionally closed⁹. The open chapters include Chapter 35 'Other issues,' which comprise the dispute with Kosovo, i.e., non-recognition of Kosovo as a separate state by Serbia. The opening of other chapters does not depend on Chapter 35, although the difficulties in closing this chapter will have an impact on the whole process. As stated in the latest EU 'Progress Report': 'The overall pace of negotiations will continue to depend in particular on a more intense pace of reforms on rule of law and in the normalisation of its relations with Kosovo as per the requirements of the Negotiating Framework'¹⁰.

The longest delay in the process of EU integration could be noted with regard to North Macedonia. It has been in the stack for 15 years, given that it submitted its application for EU membership in 2004. North Macedonia's path to the EU started along with Croatia's, though it's notable that the Macedonian SAA entered into force even prior to the Croatian agreement. The main problem was the bilateral dispute, dating from 1991, with Greece, an EU member state. At the start of the EU accession (2004-2005), the country made clear progress, visible through the signing of the SAA in 2001, the agreement's entry into force in 2004, and obtaining candidate status from the EU in 2005. These steps were made despite the dispute with Greece. The country also received its first recommendation from the European Commission (Commission) to start the negotiations with the EU in 2009. However, the process was apparently limited to this phase, as the Council of the EU has not made a decision setting the date for the start of the negotiations. The same situation was repeated in subsequent years, i.e., the recommendation from the Commission given each year was not transformed into a Council of the EU decision to start the negotia-

7 The Chapter 23 and 24 refer to 'Judiciary and fundamental rights' (23) and 'Justice, freedom and security' (24).

8 Ibidem.

9 European Commission, *Serbia 2019 Report*, 2019, <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20190529-serbia-report.pdf> [02.12.2019], p. 3.

10 Ibidem.

tions. Implicitly, the Macedonian process of EU integration has been kept in a vacuum since 2009¹¹.

The main breakthrough with regard to the dispute was made in June 2018 when the two countries (then, the Republic of Macedonia and Greece) signed an agreement that provided a solution in terms of the change of name of the country to the Republic of North Macedonia. As noted in the EU 'North Macedonia Report 2019': 'The entry into force in February 2019 of the historic agreement with Greece (also called the 'Prespa agreement') was a major breakthrough and sets an example of reconciliation for the region and beyond'¹². In addition, the report states: 'In light of the progress achieved in previous years, in April 2018, the Commission repeated its unconditional recommendation to open accession negotiations. In June 2018, the Council set out the path towards opening accession negotiations in June 2019. The Commission has continued to thoroughly monitor the reforms set in the Council Conclusions and EU-related reforms across all sectors. North Macedonia has continued to deepen the reform momentum, delivering tangible results in the key areas identified in the June 2018 Council Conclusions'¹³. However, the decision on a date for the start of the negotiations between the Republic of North Macedonia and the EU was not made as of June 2019. Neither in October 2019, opening a discussion in the country about the EU's credibility, provided that outstanding political efforts on the Macedonian side (as well as the Greek) to solve the dispute were not timely awarded.

Albania started its path towards the EU with an SAA in 2009 and obtained candidate status in 2014. In April 2018, the Commission recommended that the Council decide that accession negotiations be opened with Albania and, at the same time, encouraged Albania to maintain and deepen the current reform momentum, in particular in the key field of the rule of law. However, the country entered into a serious political crisis in the first half of 2019, resulting in a dysfunc-

11 S. Mojsovska, *Политиката на ЕУ кон Западниот Балкан... [Politikata na EU kon Zapadniot Balkan...]*, „Respublica“ 2017, <http://respublica.edu.mk/blog/2017-03-22-11-09-24> [14.10.2019].

12 European Commission, *North Macedonia 2019 Report*, 2019, <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20190529-north-macedonia-report.pdf> [02.12.2019], p. 3.

13 Ibidem.

tional parliament and, implicitly, hardships in implementation of the rule of law.

Bosnia and Hercegovina, along with Kosovo, have not yet obtained EU candidate status. This means that their path to the EU will be longer compared to the other countries.

In analysing the overall process of the EU integration of the Western Balkans, it is clear that despite the continuous process of reforms with the aim of EU accession, the countries of the region are still heavily exposed to political crises, rule of law problems, corruption, etc. In 2011, the Commission declared that the negotiations for EU membership should start with the opening of Chapter 23, 'Judiciary and fundamental rights,' and Chapter 24, 'Justice, freedom and security.' This was included in the EU 'Enlargement Strategy'¹⁴ in order to point out that these are considered as key issues for the aspiring EU countries. The EU 'Country Progress Reports' on the Western Balkan countries strongly confirm that. Apparently, all the countries face difficulties in pursuing the painful and slow reforms in the mentioned areas, implying a need for tailored EU assistance in the process.

In this context, the EU's 'Strategy for the Western Balkans: A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans' was adopted in 2018, contributing to an increased dynamic of EU engagement with the Western Balkans. As noted in the strategy document: 'In the coming years, all Western Balkan countries will have the chance to move forward on their respective European paths, on the basis of their own merits and at the speed at which they achieve them'¹⁵.

Furthermore, the EU 'Strategy for the Western Balkans' distinguishes the following¹⁶:

- Montenegro and Serbia are the current front-runners in the process;

14 European Commission, *Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2011-2012*, 2011, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/key_documents/2011/package/strategy_paper_2011_en.pdf [24.11.2019].

15 European Commission, *A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans*, 06.02.2018, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf [24.11.2019], p. 7.

16 Ibidem.

- Albania and the Republic of North Macedonia are making significant progress on their European path and the Commission is ready to prepare recommendations to open accession negotiations, on the basis of fulfilled conditions;
- With sustained effort and engagement, Bosnia and Herzegovina could become a candidate for accession;
- Kosovo has an opportunity for sustainable progress through implementation of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement and to advance on its European path once objective circumstances allow. Kosovo will also benefit considerably from a definitive normalisation agreement with Serbia.

This implies that the countries are not perceived as a package with regard to their EU membership, which is positive, given the differences in their progress, as noted above. However, even for the front-runners, EU accession cannot happen prior to 2025. In order to meet all membership conditions in the candidate countries and strengthen their democracies, comprehensive and convincing reforms are still required in crucial areas, notably on the rule of law, competitiveness, and regional cooperation and reconciliation¹⁷.

In terms of providing more specific support to the region, the EU Western Balkans strategy comprises six flagship initiatives¹⁸:

- Initiative to strengthen the rule of law;
- Initiative to reinforce engagement on security and migration;
- Initiative to enhance support for socio-economic development;
- Initiative to increase connectivity;
- Initiative for a digital agenda for the Western Balkans; and,
- Initiative to support reconciliation and good neighbourly relations.

These initiatives aim to provide further specific support to the Western Balkan countries by the advancement of existing and building of new mechanisms, enhancing cooperation among EU and Western Balkan structures in specific areas, as well as through spurring peer

¹⁷ European Commission, *A credible enlargement perspective...*, p. 3.

¹⁸ European Commission, *EU-Western Balkans Six Flagships Initiatives*, May 2018, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/six-flagship-initiatives-support-transformation-western-balkans_en.pdf [03.12.2019].

cooperation. Some of these initiatives include regional activities that aim to foster regional integration, as discussed below.

The EU Western Balkans strategy could be interpreted as a sign of increased interest in the region on the part of the EU, following the Sofia summit. This involves a higher scope of activities for the Western Balkan countries, reflecting the shortcomings in their previous efforts to deliver results in the noted areas, in particular those related to Chapters 23 and 24. The implementation of the strategy should provide a more guided EU accession process for the Western Balkan countries, but, at the same time, the EU should ensure (in a timely manner) the rewards for achieved results.

3 Regional integration of the Western Balkans • versus/along with EU accession

Along with the individual path of the Western Balkan countries towards the EU, there have been several regional initiatives launched or strongly supported by the EU. The so-called ‘Berlin Process’ is an initiative aimed at stepping up regional cooperation in the Western Balkans and aiding the integration of these countries into the EU. It was launched on August 28, 2014, by the German Chancellor Angela Merkel. The goals of the process were outlined in a ‘Final Declaration’ by the German chair of the group: ‘To make additional real progress in the reform process, in resolving outstanding bilateral and internal issues, and in achieving reconciliation within and between the societies in the region,’ as well as to enhance ‘regional economic cooperation and lay the foundations for sustainable growth’¹⁹. The Berlin Process is taking place with the support of the European Commission, international financial institutions, and the Member States involved in it – Austria, Croatia, France, Germany, Italy, Slovenia, the United Kingdom, and Poland. The process has been described as ‘supplementary to the individual countries’ institutional EU integration process, based on the adoption of the *acquis communautaire*’²⁰.

19 The Berlin Process. Information and Resource Centre, *Berlin Process*, <https://berlinprocess.info/about/> [04.10.2019].

20 Ibidem.

The Berlin Process has been associated with the initiative for the creation of a Regional Economic Area (REA), endorsed by Western Balkan leaders at their summit held in July 2017 in Trieste, Italy. This is currently the most relevant initiative for the regional integration of the Western Balkans. The REA is envisaged to comprise four dimensions: trade, investment, mobility and the digital market. The background of the idea is the aim to create a borderless area for the flow of goods, services, and labour, along with cooperation in the area of digital technologies. This could be perceived as a starting step in the creation of a Western Balkans single market, raising the issue of parallelism of both regional integration of the Western Balkans and EU membership.

The countries' preference of the EU market instead of the regional solution is evident in the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), which has covered the Western Balkans (plus Moldova) since 2006. CEFTA is a regional initiative that has enabled trade without tariff barriers, implying that the first dimension of REA has been already operational for more than a decade. Unfortunately, intra-CEFTA trade statistics indicate that the importance of regional trade is declining. In 2018, intra-CEFTA export was €4.8 billion (16 percent of the total export of CEFTA), while intra-CEFTA import was €4.2 billion (9 percent of the total CEFTA import)²¹. The respective figures in 2010 were €1 billion (19 percent of total CEFTA export) and €1.9 billion (16 percent of total CEFTA import). This indicates a positive trend in absolute trade values and the trade balance but there is a negative performance in the relative share of CEFTA in the countries' trade. The Western Balkans trade expansion is predominantly outward-oriented, with the EU being the major trading partner of all countries in the region. The EU's share in Western Balkans trade has been over 80 percent²².

These data confirm the Western Balkans' orientation towards the EU market, which feeds reservations regarding REA's success, given that trade integration is considered to be much simpler than the other two flows – capital and labour. The framework for the free flow of

21 CEFTA Statistical Portal, *Trade in goods*, <https://statistics.cefta.int/goods> [15.10.2019].

22 Ibidem.

goods already has been developed within CEFTA, as tariff barriers in the region have been removed, but it must be noted that non-tariff barriers remain a burning issue. In this context, the first dimension of REA (trade) is envisaged to be implemented via CEFTA, focusing on the successful implementation of the CEFTA 'Additional Protocol 5 on Trade Facilitation' (dealing with non-tariff barriers), adoption of the 'Additional Protocol 6 on Trade in Services' and its implementation (in particular for key services such as finance, insurance, and transport), and the start of negotiations of a new protocol on dispute settlement. This is necessary for the creation of a more favourable trading climate in the CEFTA region. However, the question of the lessening importance of CEFTA should be analysed also from the business perspective of the companies involved, implying that efforts undertaken by the EU and Western Balkan policymakers should be focused according to the interests of these businesses.

REA's second dimension foresees the establishment of a regional investment agenda, which should include exchanges of information and best practices on investment policies. The Regional Investment Reform Agenda (RIRA) already has been elaborated and endorsed by Western Balkan countries in 2018, including a detailed set of policy areas to be reformed and harmonised²³. The idea of the harmonisation of the investment policies of the countries, aiming for the attraction of more foreign investment in the region, as well enhancing Western Balkan investment throughout the area, has strong economic logic, given that the countries have small individual markets while the region comprises more than 20 million consumers. However, the implementation of RIRA demands strong coordination on the political level in each country, including a change of mindset among policymakers towards cooperation and building of regional value chains instead of competitiveness in attracting foreign investment. Given the specifics of each Western Balkan country, this would be a challenging goal.

The third dimension – mobility – envisages the removal of barriers to the movement of professionals, through regional mutual recogni-

23 Regional Cooperation Council, *Regional Investment Reform Agenda for the Western Balkans Six*, 11.05.2018, <https://www.rcc.int/docs/410/regional-investment-reform-agenda-for-the-western-balkans-six> [04.10.2019].

tion agreements of professional qualifications and removing obstacles to the mobility of students, researchers, and academics. So far, the parties have endorsed regional principles for a model of recognition of academic qualifications and launched a joint exercise to that effect²⁴. This is a very relevant area, which could spur mobility of the labour force within the region, instead of emigration abroad, which has been an enormous problem for every Western Balkan countries. It would take a lot of effort and time for proper implementation, which is likely to collide with the timing of the individual accessions of the countries to the EU. The current EU prospects for the front-runners in the process (Montenegro and Serbia) align around 2025, which provides a relatively narrow timeframe for pursuing mobility in the region without the need for a scenario elaborating the state of affairs after EU accession if mobility has already been achieved among the Western Balkan states.

The digital dimension covers roaming and broadband deployment, cybersecurity, and data protection, and will address the needs of digital skills over the region. The countries already have launched the 'Digital Agenda for the Western Balkans', which lowered roaming costs in the region and strengthened their cybersecurity capacities. This dimension is likely to advance faster compared to the other three, given the genuine interest of all of the countries. It is also essential for business and provides stronger pressure from different stakeholders in the region.

In analysing the substance of each of the dimensions of REA, it could be argued that the coordination of policies in different areas is related to the absorption of resources, in particular with regards to understanding and pursuing the concept of regional integration. On the other hand, the individual process of EU accession of each country is also related to the engagement of many resources. Pursuing both processes in parallel might be hindered by the limited availability of resources. The Commission has clearly stated that REA 'is not an alternative to EU integration. On the contrary, the progressive deepening of the economic integration in the region is based on EU rules and

24 Regional Cooperation Council, *Multi-annual Action Plan for a Regional Economic Area in the Western Balkans (MAP REA)*, https://www.rcc.int/priority_areas/39/multi-annual-action-plan-for-a-regional-economic-area-in-the-western-balkans--map [04.10.2019].

principles. Such an approach secures integration both within the region and with the EU. In this way, this initiative is an important milestone for preparation for EU accession²⁵.

The Commission's statement is logical, although, given the determination of the EU for the accession of the Western Balkan countries individually by merit, rather than as a group, there are numerous questions about the 'after-accession' relations between the EU members and non-members in the Western Balkans. In this context, if the first accession in the region happens in 2025, the benefits gained from regional integration could be of short-term value compared to the valuable resources engaged to gain it. In other words, the 'opportunity costs' of the regional integration of the Balkan countries seems to be quite high, without strong justification for all undertakings.

Furthermore, there is no timeframe set for establishing REA in the Western Balkans. It has been left to the ambition in the region. This factor is unlikely to ensure rapid development, as the primary focus of each country is on their own EU accession. In this context, the region's digital agenda is likely to be pursued, as it is of genuine interest to all the countries, while the risks of the prioritisation of a national EU agenda over regional activities are higher in other dimensions. In this respect, one should expect that regional integration will be driven by the EU, while the countries' solo efforts would mainly remain related to their individual benchmarks that need to be addressed.

4. Conclusion

The Western Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia) have been striving to become EU members for a longer time. The individual EU accession of each country is related to both specific and common challenges, and these have determined the different phases of their EU integration. Despite a late(r) start in the process, Montenegro and Serbia are currently the front-runners, with opened and relatively advanced negotiations. North Macedonia and Albania have the status

25 European Commission Press Release, *Western Balkans: Regional Economic Area*, 12.07.2017, https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-17-1967_en.htm [02.12.2019].

of candidate countries with troublesome barriers in the process as the Council of the EU has not set a date for the start of negotiations in October 2019. Bosnia and Hercegovina and Kosovo are potential candidate countries.

Apart from the individual issues of each country, they share common problems related to rule of law, organised crime, corruption, and competitiveness. The process of EU accession is very demanding, with the Union's attitude membership by merit and at a speed determined by each country. This serves as an incentive for the Western Balkan countries to focus strongly on the problematic issues, provided that their progress towards the EU depends on their efforts. In this respect, the most positive example has been North Macedonia, whose political leadership has put outstanding effort into solving the name dispute with Greece. Unfortunately, the EU has not provided a timely reward for solving one of the most relevant benchmark issues for this country, prolonging the decision to set the start of negotiations. This example indicates that the effort required to ensure each country's accession to the EU must be recognized by the Union in terms of ensuring its credibility, as well as maintaining the region's faith in the accession process.

In parallel to the countries' individual processes of EU integration, the initiative for establishing the REA in the Western Balkans has been initiated. The REA's four dimensions are trade, investment, mobility, and the digital market. Given the need for each country to deploy resources for regional process, too, as well as the dilemmas related to genuine connectivity between the processes – national and regional – the regional integration is likely to be hindered by the primary focus of the countries on their individual accession process. There are aspects of the regional agenda, such as the digital agenda that are likely to be driven by each country's own, genuine interest. However, success in other dimensions of the REA depends on ensuring a clear contribution to the individual EU accession processes. Without that, regional integration will remain a costly parallel process under EU auspices, absorbing valuable resources necessary for the individual accession of the Western Balkan countries.

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