



NEXT STEPS FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMITMENT TO EU ENLARGEMENT



Summary

What should progressive forces do to finally overcome the deadlock that characterise European enlargement policies and ensure a credible political turn? What are their responsibilities? These topics were at the centre of the debate “What is progressive? The EU and the challenge of enlargement to the Western Balkans” that took place on 18 June 2021. Discussion pointed out how stronger alliances among progressives and enhanced civil society participation to the enlargement process are key elements that should be strengthened in order to shift enlargement policies from technicalities to politics.

About the authors:

Maria Francesca Rita
Researcher, CeSPI

In partnership with:

**FRIEDRICH
EBERT
STIFTUNG**

Centro Studi
di Politica
Internazionale
CeSPI

Fondation
Jean Jaurès

Let's move: Next steps for progressives' commitment in the Western Balkans

Maria Francesca Rita

Researcher, CeSPI

To think about what the European Union should have done or should do in the future with regard to the enlargement process is no longer sufficient.

This is why the roundtable “What is progressive? The EU and the challenge of enlargement to the Western Balkans” organised by the Foundation for European Progressive Studies, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, the Fondation Jean Jaurès and the Centro Studi Politica Internazionale, in cooperation with Villa Vigoni, on 18 June 2021 was extremely important. The debate was structured around two macro-themes: post-Covid-19 recovery and re-launching a credible enlargement perspective for Western Balkans countries.

Initially centred on what steps the EU should undertake to right the wrongs made so far, the discussion rapidly shifted to what progressive forces should do, what are their responsibilities and what alliances should be built in order to overcome this impasse. To change the subject and the central actor of the process is a crucial step. The focus must turn to the progressive dimension, and see not only what progressives can do per se, but also what they should do in order to ensure a truly credible, dynamic, predictable and political engagement of the EU institutions in the region.

Starting with the second point, progressive forces are the only ones that can bring the enlargement policy back on the EU agenda. The European Union has recently made two major mistakes: it has failed to involve the Western Balkan countries in the European vaccination campaign and in the Conference on the Future of Europe. Both these mistakes can be amended, and this move would represent a sound and clear signal of the EU's interest towards the region. The vaccination campaign is not over, and realistically it will need to be re-run in the next few years. This is an example of the reason why it is not enough to think about what has happened in the past, but it is necessary to take actions for the future. To ensure that the Western Balkan countries will be involved in the next vaccination campaigns and to advocate for their involvement in the Conference on the Future of Europe might represent two important, and not only symbolically, steps.



But what can progressive forces do? The creation of a strong political network would certainly enhance progressive forces in the Western Balkans. While it is true that every party has its own problems and its domestic conflicts to solve, European progressive parties and affiliated parties in the Western Balkans should unite in a Social Democratic network aimed at reinvigorating the political interest in Brussels. This would be a strong step forward both for Europe's credibility in the Western Balkans and to implement the necessary shift from a technical to a political approach on the EU's side. Parties in the Western Balkans affiliated with European progressive forces need to receive clear indications and messages; therefore, the launch of joint initiatives to solicit European institutions through a network would be of high importance. Regarding the EU, it is widely recognised that the enlargement process is full of technicalities. A more political, more outspoken and more empathic approach is therefore strongly needed.

Another point approved by the participants is the need to be closer to citizens. If progressive forces want to make a difference, they must prove their attention towards people's needs and their willing to consider civil society organisations as peer interlocutors and partners. Therefore, it will be necessary to advocate for fast financing lines for projects which involve civil society organisations in both member and non-member states. In this, the work of associations, research centres and think tanks like the ones involved in this project is central. Only through a participatory approach that involves also civil society it will be possible to re-gain the trust of the public opinion. The growing scepticism of the public opinion, both in the Western Balkans and in the EU member states, can be overcome through a citizens-centred approach.

EU delegations in the WB countries are usually distant from citizens' everyday problems. The issues watchdog organisations and civil society organisations advocate for are rarely taken into account by EU representatives. To counter this trend, it should be ensured that social principles are more integrated in the EU agenda towards the Western Balkans. Setting up of a social pillar built on the basis of the European policy objective "A more social Europe" and the European Pillar of Social Rights, to be developed through an action plan drafted with civil society organisations could help move in this direction. Moreover, this social rights pillar should be integrated in the accession process as a set of principles addressed directly to citizens and not to institutions.

In conclusion, the European approach towards the Western Balkans should not only move from technicalities to politics, it should also be increasingly centred on values. In this, progressive forces have a strong responsibility. Being progressives means fighting to strengthen democracy and the rule of law, and to guarantee that fundamental rights are protected. Progressive forces are the only ones who can break the status quo and move from the far-right narrative to a narrative of inclusion, participation and common values. It is in this sense that the debate about the revised methodology has been deemed as unnecessary. Before debating about that, progressive forces must stress the value-driven dimension of the enlargement process. The biggest effort is to prove to citizens in the Western Balkans that the European integration is not an aim in itself. It is rather an instrument to ensure democracy, transparency, and media freedom.



Related FEPS publications

FEPS
FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN
PROGRESSIVE STUDIES

FEPS Policy Brief
July 2021

**CHALLENGES FOR ENLARGEMENT
IN A POST-COVID SCENARIO**

Summary

Today, stating that the EU enlargement towards the Western Balkans is in a gloomy scenario is a double-edged sword. The number of declarations, commitments, initiatives and visits from Brussels and some member states has only diminished a gloomy situation, as it does not reflect reality and the commitment to the region. European perspective remains full of risks, the case of the Bulgarian vote to the opening of North Macedonia's intergovernmental Conference (IGC) only strengthened such gloomy picture.

This policy brief looks at how to put the process of enlargement back into the European Union's agenda in a post-Covid environment, to prevent a further detachment of the Western Balkan states from the EU, and taking advantage of the new financing opportunities of the period 2021-27. It also looks at the role that European progressives should play in order to make European accession a credible project for the WBKs.

About the authors:

Maria Francesca Rita
Research Fellow
with an introduction by
Dario D'Urso
Research Fellow

In partnership with:

FRIEDRICH EBERT STIFTUNG
Foundation Jean Jaurès
CESPI

FRIEDRICH EBERT STIFTUNG
Foundation Jean Jaurès
FEPS
FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN
PROGRESSIVE STUDIES

Policy Brief
April 2021

**DEALING WITH EU ACCESSION
IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTIES**

**From halfway commitments
to overlapping agendas**

Summary

The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic has put to test EU's cohesion and effectiveness not only with regards to its internal governance, but also in relation to its strategic partnerships with neighbouring countries, starting from the enlargement countries in the Western Balkans.

While a series of multiple crises in the EU were already contributing to cement intransigence towards the enlargement agenda, the pandemic seems to have exacerbated pre-existing problems related to this policy, which is being counteracted under the pressure of current emergencies.

Indeed, the process of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans is today marked by ambiguity, not providing a clear path towards EU membership. To navigate through these gloomy and gloomy days, EU-Western Balkan relations should move from halfway commitments toward a common agenda of tackling the root causes of the current situation, namely the enduring socio-economic entropy and political backsliding in the Western Balkans.

About the author:

Matteo Bonomi
Research Fellow
Officer of the International Staff

About the project:

This Policy Brief is produced in the framework of the project "What is Progressive? The EU and the challenge of enlargement to the Western Balkans". Copyright © 2021 by the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS), the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) and the Foundation Jean Jaurès (FJJ).

**EU enlargement
to the Western
Balkans**

FRIEDRICH EBERT STIFTUNG
FEPS
FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN
PROGRESSIVE STUDIES
Foundation Jean Jaurès

**From EU Enlargement Fatigue
to Ambiguity**

By Matteo Bonomi