

## **A West Balkan Agenda for 2019**

Background paper for “Back on the Agenda: EU Enlargement to the Western Balkans”

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The EU accession process can inspire reforms, increase prosperity, strengthen democracy and help transform the politics of the Western Balkans. In order to achieve this, it needs to be credible and fair. It needs to provide clear guidance to politicians, inspire civil servants and help them to focus, and signal to civil society where a country stands in any given area of reform. Currently the process does not achieve these objectives.

First, there is an obvious problem of credibly assessing the state of reforms in various Balkan countries. Front runner Montenegro has opened 31 out of 35 chapters, Macedonia has opened none. The assessments of the Commission’s annual reports suggest that Turkey, Montenegro and Macedonia are all at the same level in priority areas covered by the Commission’s “fundamentals first” approach (see annex). This is not useful guidance to anyone, reformers or outside observers, and needs to be improved.

Second, based on the existing Commission assessments, the ongoing process is not delivering reforms even in countries currently negotiating. Reforms in Serbia in many areas have slowed down since the country opened negotiations in January 2014. The rule of law is no more advanced in Montenegro than in Bosnia and Herzegovina. One reason for this may be the lack of clear feedback and credible assessments of what is missing.

As a result, the formal status of a country (potential candidate, candidate, negotiating) or whether a certain chapter has been opened or not does not say much about a country’s preparedness to join the EU.

### **A model that worked**

When we look back at the EU approach towards the Western Balkans over the last decade, there is one model that worked well: the visa-liberalisation process for the Western Balkans.

It was based on a simple model: First, develop a comprehensive list of criteria and present it to all countries, regardless of their formal status in the accession process. Then put together teams of experts, including from member states, to assess regularly all criteria in all countries. Finally, make the assessments available in a systematic and comparable way, using clear and unambiguous language.

This approach led to substantive reforms in all countries, including in those initially lagging behind. It also helped to convince sceptics in EU member states. Credible assessments convincingly showing that the criteria were indeed met convinced even sceptical European politicians to grant visa-free travel.

The visa-liberalisation model was based on motivational tools everyone who has ever tried to master a challenge is familiar with: clear goals, detailed and continuous feedback, and an element of competition and comparison with peers.

The accession process as we know it today does not yet do enough to achieve the same. There is not enough quality feedback. This makes comparisons, benchmarking and positive competition between Western Balkan countries in specific reform areas impossible.

### **An agenda for 2019**

The European Commission has recognised these problems. It has also begun to move in the direction of addressing them. But it has not yet gone far enough. Here is how it could.

First, it would be good to establish clear common criteria based on the *acquis* (a core *acquis*) in the form of reform roadmaps in key areas, such as public procurement (chapter 5), food safety (chapter 12), or statistics (chapter 18), later to be extended to more areas.

Second, it could then appoint teams of experts, including some seconded by member states, to assess progress on these roadmap criteria regularly in all Western Balkan countries. These assessments should be made publicly available, in a comparable fashion and in clear language.

This would put the European Commission reports at the centre of reform debates in the Western Balkans, as the most credible analysis of reform performance. It would convince sceptics in EU member states that when progress is reported, it is based on thorough assessments.

Most importantly it would strengthen reformers in the Western Balkans. At the same time more easily understandable and more comparable information on reforms can empower opposition groups, media and civil society to expose shortcomings more easily.

## Annex: Fundamentals (enhanced methodology): the state of play 2016 vs. 2018

Grades according to assessments of the European Commission presented in the 2016 and 2018 reports.

The Commission used a five-tier standard assessment scale to describe the level of preparedness:

*Early stage – Some level of preparation – Moderately prepared – Good level of preparation – Well advanced*

For the purpose of readability, ESI translated this into five grades (1 is best, 5 worst) and the three colours of a traffic light:

Preparedness	Grade
Well advanced	1
Good level of preparation	2
Moderately prepared	3
Some level of preparation	4
Early stage	5

Chapter/issue	Turkey		Macedonia		Montenegro		Serbia		Albania		Bosnia		Kosovo	
	16	18	16	18	16	18	16	18	16	18	16	18	16	18
Public administration reform	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	5	5	4	4
Functioning of the judiciary	4/5	5	4	4	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	5	5
Fight against corruption	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	5/4	5/4
Fight against organised crime	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	5	5
Freedom of expression	5	5	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4/3	4	4	4	4
Existence of functioning market economy	1	1	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	5	5	5	5
Capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces in the EU	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	4	4	5	5	5	5
OVERALL SCORE	23.5	24	24	24	24	24	25	25	26	25.5	31	31	32.5	32.5
AVERAGE	3.4	3.4	3.4	3.4	3.4	3.4	3.6	3.6	3.7	3.6	4.4	4.4	4.6	4.6