



EXPERIENCE OF THE WESTERN BALKANS IN EUROPEAN INTEGRATION AND LESSONS FOR UKRAINE





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EUROPEAN INTEGRATION OF THE WESTERN BALKANS

IDEOLOGY AND FIRST STEPS

PRINCIPLES

The mission of creating a common European home and forming a united European community after World War II is ideologically premised on the desire of Western European leaders to prevent conflicts among the countries of the continent and, by coming together, build a stronger and wealthier Europe. The fundamental idea of European integration was to maintain lasting peace through the development of cooperation — primarily in trade and economy in general — among former adversaries that would result in a single common market.

These fundamental principles — peace and prosperity through cooperation and integration — have been at the heart of the EU's policy towards the Western Balkans, which have been engulfed in military conflicts. The borders of the Western Balkans can be defined as "ex-Yugoslavia plus Albania and minus Slovenia." Slovenia was the first among the former Yugoslav republics to join the EU in 2004 under the same procedure as the Central and Eastern European countries. In 2013, Croatia became the second former republic of the SFRY to become an EU member after Slovenia. Croatia's accession took place in conformity with a methodology adopted specifically for the Western Balkans.

The paramount goal of the European Union in the process of integration of the Western Balkans – Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia, Macedonia (now the Republic of North Macedonia), Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and (partially recognized) Kosovo — was and remains to create a safe environment in the south-east and pre-

serve peace in the region. This includes efforts to combat organized crime, which is the source of arms, drugs and illegal migrants to the EU. During the 2015 migration crisis, the "Balkan route" was the main corridor for illegal migrants into the EU. The heightened activity of Russia and China in the region is an additional challenge that requires a coordinated EU response.

STABILIZATION AND ASSOCIATION PROCESS

Due to the consequences of the wars that accompanied the break-up of Yugoslavia and the still unresolved conflicts, the European integration of the Western Balkans is characterized by an emphasis on regional security and stability as a prerequisite for EU accession. Therefore, such a traditional instrument as the association agreement has been supplemented by a stabilization component, comprising conflict settlement, insurance of transitional justice (punishment of war criminals and crimes against humanity), enhancement of regional cooperation for building good-neighborly relations based on closer trade and economic ties (including among former adversaries).

The region's European integration is taking place within the Stabilization and Association Process, launched by the European Union in 1999, when armed conflicts were still raging in the region¹. The process was formalized through the signing of the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) between the Western Balkans and EU member states.

¹ *Stabilisation and Association Process. European Commission – Enlargement – Stabilisation and Association Process*, European commission: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/policy/glossary/terms/sap_en

These agreements stipulate political and economic cooperation and the establishment of free trade areas with the EU. The EU pays special attention to the rule of law, fight against corruption and organized crime in the region, adherence to democratic principles and procedures and political stability.

The stabilization and association process includes:

- contractual relations (bilateral Stabilization and Association Agreements between the European Union and the Western Balkans);
- free trade areas with the EU²;
- financial assistance (now the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance — IPA) and the economic and investment plan for the Western Balkans of 2020;
- development of regional cooperation and good-neighbourly relations.

The Stabilization and Association Process sets common political and economic goals as well as overall frameworks and strategic guidelines for the entire Western Balkans region, but the specific tasks, speed and path to achieving the goals differ from country to country. Accordingly, the Stabilization and Association Agreements are adapted to each partner. By creating a free trade area between the EU and the country concerned, the agreements also define common political and economic goals and encourage regional cooperation.³

At the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit, the European Council reaffirmed that all the countries participating in the Stabilization and Association Process were potential candidates for EU membership, including Kosovo⁴. In 2005, the EU's relations with the Western Balkans were officially recognized as part of the EU's enlargement policy (moved from the section "External Relations" to the "Enlargement" section). The European perspective of the countries of the region was reaffirmed in the European Commission's Strategy for the Western Balkans in February 2018 and is an essential element of the final declarations of the EU-Western Balkans Summit. During its EU presidency in 2018, Bulgaria announced the intensification of the integration of the Western Balkans among its key priorities,⁵ but the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Sofia revealed a deep disagreement among EU member states on further enlargement.⁶

Montenegro, Serbia, North Macedonia and Albania are currently official candidates, whereas Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are potential candidate countries, which have signed Stabilization and Association Agreements. The first agreement entered into force with the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia in 2004; the second one to become operative in 2005 was the agreement with Croatia, which expired when the country joined the EU in 2013. The last agreement was signed by Kosovo in 2016, but in this case it is only an agreement for the EU, which did not need to be ratified by member states (because five member states do not recognize Kosovo's independence).

Negotiations on EU accession with Montenegro and Serbia have been ongoing since 2012 and 2014, respectively. In March 2020, EU member

² André De Munter, *The Western Balkans*, European Parliament, October 2021: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/168/the-western-balkans>

³ *Stabilisation and Association Agreement. European Commission – Enlargement – Stabilisation and Association Agreement*, European commission: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/policy/glossary/terms/saa_en

⁴ Five out of 27 EU members do not recognize Kosovo. These are Spain, Slovakia, Cyprus, Romania and Greece.

⁵ *Bulgaria takes over the EU presidency*, European Western Balkans, January 1, 2018: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2018/01/01/bulgaria-takes-eu-presidency/>

⁶ Ibid.

states agreed in principle to start accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania, but as of July 2021, negotiations have not started. Bosnia and Herzegovina applied to join the EU in 2016, and the Stabilization and Association Agreement with Kosovo came into force the same year.⁷

In addition to the "personal" Stabilization and Association Agreements, the Copenhagen criteria for membership in the European Union, which they must meet, remain a guideline for candidates for EU accession and include:

- stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of national minorities (political criteria);
- existence of a functioning market economy and the capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the EU (economic criteria);
- ability to take on the obligations of membership, including strict adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary union (other criteria).

CROATIAN EXPERIENCE⁸

Each Western Balkan country must follow its own path of European integration, one of the main stages of which is overcoming corruption, asserting democratization and, for the post-Yugoslav countries, achieving post-war settlement.

How this happens in practice is demonstrated by the experience of Croatia.

Croatia became the first candidate country to sign a Stabilization and Association Agreement with the European Union (October 29, 2001) and the first country in the Western Balkans to join the EU (July 1, 2013).

The key areas of European integration for Croatia were:

- fight against corruption;
- political reform;
- empowerment of national minorities;
- cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in the field of punishment of war criminals.

Fight against corruption.

In December 2001, the Office for the Suppression of Corruption and Organized Crime (USKOK), a specialized unit of the State Prosecutor's Office, was opened. The anti-corruption body has successfully investigated the cases of more than 2,000 indictments, reaching a conviction level of about 95 percent.

⁷ Commission assesses and sets out reform for the countries aiming to join the EU, European commission, October 6, 2020: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_1816

⁸ Natalia Ishchenko, *Yak vstupyty do YeES pislia viiny z susidom: shcho zminiuvala ta yakyi opir dolala povoienno Khorvatiia*, Yevropeiska pravda, April 3, 2020: <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/articles/2020/04/3/7108287/>

The USKOK's most high-profile case has been bringing to justice former Croatian Prime Minister Ivo Sanader.

Political reform.

To overcome the authoritarian tendencies of the post-communist and post-war countries, amendments were made to the Constitution, which introduced a parliamentary republic instead of a state with a strong presidential power.

Empowerment of national minorities.

As part of democratization, non-Croat citizens, especially Serbs, have gained more rights. This concerns the use of language, education and culture, suffrage. In December 2002, a special Constitutional Law on the Rights of National Minorities was adopted. Thus, conditions were created for reintegrating the Serb minority into Croatian society and removing informal barriers to the return of Serbian refugees.

Cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in the Punishment of War Criminals.

This area has turned out to be the most challenging for Croatia.

In 2000, the parliament adopted a Declaration on Cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. In July 2001, another general, Ante Gotovina, the commander of Operation Storm — a key component of the Croat victory in the war — was indicted in The Hague.

The Croatian authorities did not agree with the charges. Gotovina fled Croatia and began to hide from justice. But the European Union unequivocally conditioned membership talks on the prosecution of the Croatian general. In 2003, Croatia formally applied to join the EU, but European integration was suspended due to the dispute over Ante Gotovina. The general was detained in Spain in 2005. In 2011, the first

instance of the Hague Tribunal found him guilty and sentenced him to 24 years in prison.

Mass protests began in Croatia, and billboards were posted across the country in defense of the general. Support for the country's EU membership ahead of a referendum on the issue fell to a record low of 23 percent.

The position of Ante Gotovina himself in this situation was decisive. The general (from The Hague) asked his compatriots to vote "yes" in the referendum on EU accession.

As a result, on January 22, 2012, two thirds of those who came to the polling station (43.51 percent) voted in favor of Croatia's membership in the European Union. Under Croatian law, the referendum was considered to have taken place.

In November 2012, the Appeals Chamber of the Hague Tribunal fully acquitted Gotovina, thus ending the conflict that hindered Croatia's accession to the EU.

On July 1, 2013, Croatia became a member of the European Union.

The Croatian experience of European integration is essential for Ukraine, as it demonstrates the importance not only of formal membership criteria but also of resolving political and humanitarian issues, which are fundamental from the EU's point of view to ensure stable democratic development of the candidate country and the region as a whole. Although these requirements are individual for each country and are not clearly set forth in the basic EU documents, this does not make them any less important.

INSTRUMENT FOR PRE-ACCESSION ASSISTANCE

To carry out the necessary reforms, candidate and potential candidate countries receive financial assistance from the EU.

Since 2007, the European Union's assistance has been channeled through a single unified tool, the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA).^{9 10}

The Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance is designed to prepare candidate and potential candidate countries for EU membership and the rights and responsibilities associated with it.

The IPA was first introduced for the period of 2007–2013 (IPA I), replacing a number of European Union programs and financial instruments for candidate or potential candidate countries.

The IPA consists of five different components¹¹:

- 1 Assistance for transition and institution building;
- 2 Cross-border cooperation (with EU Member States and other countries eligible for IPA);
- 3 Regional development (transport, environment, regional and economic development);
- 4 Human resources (strengthening human capital and developing an inclusive society);
- 5 Rural development.

IPA beneficiary countries are divided into two categories:

- A EU candidate countries (Albania, Montenegro, Serbia and the Republic of North Macedonia and Turkey) are eligible for all five components;
- B Potential candidates (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo) are eligible for only the first two components.

⁹ *Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA)*, European Commission: https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/funding/ipa/

¹⁰ *Analiz dostupnykh resursiv YeS dlia pidtrymky reform v Ukraini*, International Center for Policy Studies: http://icps.com.ua/assets/uploads/images/files/icps_eu_funds.pdf

¹¹ *Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA)*, European Commission: https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/funding/ipa/

The financial envelope of IPA II (2014–2020) amounted to €11.7 billion (€12.8 billion in current prices).¹²

IPA II 2014-2020 indicative allocations

Country	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018-2020	TOTAL 2014-2020
Albania	83.7	86.9	89.7	92.9	296.3	649.5
Bosnia & Herzegovina	39.7	39.7	42.7	43.7	*	165.8
Kosovo*	83.8	85.9	88.7	91.9	295.2	645.5
Montenegro	39.6	35.6	37.4	39.5	118.4	272.5
North Macedonia	85.7	88.9	91.6	94.9	303.1	664.2
Serbia	195.1	201.4	207.9	215.4	688.2	1,508.0
Turkey	620.4	626.4	630.7	636.4	1,940.0	4,453.9
Multi-country	348.0	365.0	390.0	410.7	1,445.3	2,958.7

* Amounts to be decided at a later stage.

The budget of the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance in 2021–2027 (IPA III) will be €14.162 billion in current prices. The funding will be provided to candidate countries, including potential ones, to wit: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey. The new enlargement mechanism strengthens the conditionality between reforms and access to financial resources; for example, a setback in the areas of democracy, human rights and the rule of law leads to the suspension of aid.¹³

¹² Velina Lilyanova, *Legislative train schedule. New boost for jobs, growth and investment, Proposal for a regulation of the EP and the Council establishing the instruments for pre-accession assistance*, European parliament, січень 2021: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-new-boost-for-jobs-growth-and-investment/file-mff-ipa-iii>

¹³ *European Parliament and Council reach agreement on €14 billion IPA III*, European Western Balkans, June 3, 2021: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/06/03/european-parliament-and-council-reach-agreement-on-e14-billion-ipa-iii/>

NEW METHODOLOGY OF EU ENLARGEMENT

When the five-year "moratorium on enlargement" of the European Union declared by Juncker was coming to an end, the European Commission published the EU Enlargement Strategy. The document, presented on February 6, 2018, reaffirmed the European perspective of the Western Balkans and provided for enhanced EU cooperation with Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, the FYR of Macedonia (now North Macedonia), Montenegro and Serbia.¹⁴

According to the document, the European Commission believed that Montenegro and Serbia, which had been in formal accession negotiations for several years, could become members of the EU by 2025 if they met all the requirements.

However, despite the presented strategic vision, the process of EU enlargement has slowed down again.

In October 2019, the start of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia was blocked. The Netherlands opposed the beginning of negotiations with Albania, citing unsatisfactory results in the fight against organized crime and corruption.¹⁵ The position of France was that it was better not to divide these countries and not to start negotiations with any of them. At the same time, Emmanuel Macron told reporters

that membership applications could not be considered until the EU's internal reform had taken place. According to him, the EU in its current state is unable to meet modern challenges, let alone accept two more states from the Balkan region, which was engulfed in war in the 1990s and is fighting crime and corruption. "We need a reformed European Union and a reformed enlargement process, a real credibility and a strategic vision of who we are and our role," Macron told a news conference.¹⁶

France proposed changes to the process of admitting new members to the European Union.¹⁷ A new methodology for accession negotiations¹⁸ was presented by the European Commission in February 2020. In March of the same year, the Council of the European Union formally approved the EC's proposal for a new enlargement methodology.¹⁹

Until now, negotiations were held on 35 chapters of the *acquis communautaire* system. The European Commission proposed to combine them into six clusters, such as the internal market, foreign affairs, etc. The first cluster includes fundamental reforms — the rule of law, functioning of democracy, fight against corruption — and will be negotiated at the beginning and end of the accession process. The opening of other clusters (internal market, competitiveness and inclusive

¹⁴ A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans, European Commission, February 6, 2018: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf

¹⁵ Sinisa Jakov Marusic, *Netherlands Welcomes EU Talks With North Macedonia, not Albania*, BalkanInsight, October 9, 2019: <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/10/09/netherlands-welcomes-eu-talks-with-north-macedonia-not-albania/>

¹⁶ Robin Emmott, *France under fire for 'historic error' of blocking Balkan EU hopefuls*, Reuters, October 18, 2019: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-summit-balkans-idUSKBN1WXICT>

¹⁷ Andrew Rettman, *France unveils new model EU enlargement*, EUobserver, November 16, 2019: <https://euobserver.com/enlargement/146624>

¹⁸ *Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans*, European Commission, February 5, 2020: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/enlargement-methodology_en.pdf

¹⁹ *New enlargement methodology officially endorsed by the Member States*, European Western Balkans, March 27, 2020: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/03/27/new-enlargement-methodology-officially-endorsed-by-the-member-states/>

European Commission's Proposal for a Reformed Enlargement Methodology

“Even more focus on fundamental reforms”

- A roadmap for the rule of law chapters equivalent to the previous action plans
- A roadmap on the functioning of democratic institutions and public administration reform
- A stronger link with the economic reform programme process to help the countries meet the economic criteria

“Put the political nature of the process front and centre”

- Regular EU-Western Balkans summits and intensified ministerial contacts
- Member States will be invited to contribute more systematically to the accession process through contributions to annual reports and monitoring
- Country-specific IGCs after publication of the Commission's annual package
- All bodies under the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) to focus much more on the key political issues and reforms
- Corrective measures in annual Commission's reports

“Inject further dynamism into the negotiating process”

- Negotiating chapters will be organised in thematic clusters
- Negotiations on each cluster will be opened as a whole – after fulfilling the opening benchmarks
- Clusters will be aligned with SAA sub-committees

“Greater clarity on what the Union expects and what the positive and negative consequences are”

Rewarding reform efforts:

- Work for accelerated integration and “phasing-in” to individual EU policies
- Increased funding and investments

Sanctioning lack of progress:

- Negotiations can be put on hold in certain areas, or in the most serious cases, suspended overall; already closed chapters could be re-opened
- Scope and intensity of EU funding could be adjusted downward
- Benefits of closer integration could be paused or withdrawn

Commitment to already existing aspects of enlargement methodology:

- Negotiations on the fundamentals will be opened first and closed last
- Interim benchmarks will continue to be set. No other chapter will be provisionally closed before these benchmarks are met.
- Anti-corruption work will be mainstreamed through a strong focus in relevant chapters
- All efforts need to be undertaken to resolve bilateral disputes, with an emphasis on the EU-facilitated dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina
- Merit-based accession process lead by conditionality

Proposed clusters of the negotiating chapters

Fundamentals

- 23. Judiciary and fundamental rights
- 24. Justice, Freedom and Security
- Economic Criteria
- Functioning of Democratic Institutions
- Public administration reform
- 5. Public procurement
- 18. Statistics
- 32. Financial control

Internal Market

- 1. Free movement of goods
- 2. Freedom of movement for workers
- 3. Right of establishment and freedom to provide services
- 4. Free movement of capital
- 6. Company law
- 7. Intellectual property law
- 8. Competition policy
- 9. Financial services
- 28. Consumer and health protection

Competitiveness and inclusive growth

- 10. Information society and media
- 16. Taxation
- 17. Economic and monetary policy
- 19. Social policy and employment
- 20. Enterprise and industrial policy
- 25. Science and research
- 26. Education and culture
- 29. Customs union

Green agenda and sustainable connectivity

- 14. Transport policy
- 15. Energy
- 21. Trans-European networks
- 27. Environment and climate change
- 26. Education and culture
- 29. Customs union

Resources, agriculture and cohesion

- 11. Agriculture and rural development
- 12. Food safety, veterinary and phytosanitary policy
- 13. Fisheries
- 22. Regional policy & coordination of structural instruments
- 33. Financial & budgetary provisions

External relations

- 30. External relations
- 31. Foreign, security & defence policy

*Chapters 24, Institutions and 30: Other issues would be handled separately

European Fund for the Balkans

growth: resources, agriculture and cohesion, external relations, green agenda) will depend on the progress of reforms strengthening the rule of law. The new methodology provides for the possibility of reopening already closed chapters and suspending assistance in the case of a roll-back in reforms.

For detailed changes, please consult the infographic from the European Western Balkans²⁰

The new approach was to have been applied to candidates for EU membership which were just starting the negotiation process — Albania and North Macedonia. But on May 6, 2021, with the consent of Podgorica and Belgrade, the EU decided to apply the new methodology to Montenegro and Serbia,²¹ despite the fact that the negotiation process with these countries had been going on for several years under different rules.

As of October 2021, the EU's negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia have not yet begun.

²⁰ Proposal for a Reformed Enlargement Methodology, European Western Balkans, March 27, 2020: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/03/03/proposal-for-a-reformed-enlargement-methodology/>

²¹ EU approves implementation of new methodology in pre-accession talks with Serbia, Montenegro, EURACTIV, May 7, 2021: https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/eu-approves-implementation-of-new-methodology-in-pre-accession-talks-with-serbia-montenegro/

REGIONAL COOPERATION

SEECP AND THE REGIONAL COOPERATION COUNCIL

The establishment and development of regional cooperation in all possible areas and the strengthening of good-neighborly relations was and remains an important aspect of the European integration of the Western Balkans. In this regard, a broader format of cooperation among the countries of South-Eastern Europe should be singled out — the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP), launched in 1996 in Sofia, Bulgaria, to strengthen good-neighborly relations among all countries in the region and turn it into an area of peace, security, stability and, most importantly, cooperation to foster EU and NATO accession for SEECP participants. The SEECP is the only forum for regional cooperation in South-Eastern Europe that was launched and is managed by the countries of the region.

As defined in the Charter on Good Neighborly Relations, Stability, Security and Cooperation in the SEE,²² adopted in Bucharest in 2000, the main objectives of the SEECP are:

- strengthening political and security cooperation;
- promoting economic cooperation;
- expanding people-to-people contacts, strengthening democracy and the rule of law;
- combating illegal activities.

The participants of the SEECP are:

- Albania
- Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Bulgaria
- Greece
- Republic of North Macedonia
- Romania
- Serbia
- Turkey
- Croatia (2005)
- Moldova (2006)
- Montenegro (2007)
- Slovenia (2010)
- Kosovo (2014)



²² Charter on good-neighborly relations, stability, security and cooperation in South-Eastern Europe, SEECP, February 12, 2000: https://www.rcc.int/files/user/docs/2013.10.03_CHARTER_SEECD.pdf

In 2020–2021, the process of cooperation in South-Eastern Europe is led by Turkey.²³

The Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) was officially launched at the 2008 meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the South-East European Cooperation Process in Sofia.²⁴ This cooperation mechanism comprises 46 participants, funded by the European Union, South-Eastern European countries and other members of the RCC. The Council has a Secretariat based in Sarajevo and a Liaison Office in Brussels.²⁵

The activities of the Regional Cooperation Council are aimed at supporting the European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations of non-EU actors and developing cooperation in areas such as economic and social development, energy and infrastructure, justice and internal affairs, security cooperation, human capital development and interparliamentary relations.

The RCC participants are²⁶:

1. Albania
2. Austria
3. Bosnia and Herzegovina
4. Bulgaria
5. Canada
6. Council of Europe
7. Council of Europe Development Bank
8. Croatia
9. Czech Republic
10. Denmark
11. European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
12. European Investment Bank
13. European Union (EU), represented by a representative of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and a representative of the European Commission

14. Federal Republic of Germany
15. Finland
16. France
17. Greece
18. Hungary
19. International Organization for Migration
20. Ireland
21. Italy
22. Kosovo
23. Latvia
24. Moldova
25. Montenegro
26. North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)
27. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
28. Poland
29. Republic of North Macedonia
30. Norway
31. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
32. Romania
33. Serbia
34. Slovakia
35. Slovenia
36. South-East European Cooperation Initiative
37. Spain
38. Sweden
39. Switzerland
40. Turkey
41. United Kingdom
42. United Nations
43. UN Development Program
44. UN Economic Commission for Europe
45. United States
46. World Bank Group

As part of the general policy guidelines established by the SEECP, the Regional Cooperation Council works to develop and maintain a political climate of dialogue, reconciliation, tolerance and openness to cooperation in order to ensure the implementation of regional pro-

²³ South-Eastern European cooperation process, Regional Cooperation Council: <https://www.rcc.int/pages/111/south-east-european-cooperation-process-seecp>

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ About us, Regional Cooperation Council: <https://www.rcc.int/pages/2/about-us>

²⁶ RCC participants, Regional Cooperation Council: <https://www.rcc.int/pages/96/participants>

grams for economic and social development for the people of the region.²⁷

CENTRAL EUROPEAN FREE TRADE AGREEMENT (CEFTA)

On December 19, 2006, in Bucharest, under the chairmanship of Romania, the Central European Free Trade Agreement was substantially amended and its membership was expanded to include six Western Balkan countries and the Republic of Moldova. At the same time, as provided for in the Agreement, Bulgaria and Romania withdrew from the CEFTA after joining the EU in 2007, and Croatia terminated its membership upon joining the EU in July 2013.²⁸

Despite the current CEFTA free trade agreement, interstate trade and business contacts among Western Balkan countries in general are complicated, primarily due to border and customs controls, separate phytosanitary certificates for each country and various technical and logistical barriers to trade. The mutual opening of CEFTA members to the free movement of goods, services, people and capital is at the heart of the Common Regional Market, the most ambitious goal of the Berlin Process for the Western Balkans (see below).

The Chairs' Conclusions of the Berlin Process Summit (July 5, 2021) noted the completion of technical work for several important CEFTA decisions: e-commerce, mutual recognition of Authorized Economic Operators programs (AEOS), mutual recognition of professional qualifications, removal of work permits.²⁹ A positive experience was the implementation of the initiative Green Corridors on the borders of the

Western Balkans during the pandemic, which allowed rapidly transporting basic medical and food products. The Summit agreed on the introduction of "green corridors" at all checkpoints within the CEFTA and agreed to work to expedite the clearance of goods with neighboring EU Member States.

BRDO-BRIJUNI PROCESS

Even before Croatia's accession to the European Union, in 2010, the leaders of Croatia and Slovenia (an EU member since 2004) decided to launch an annual multilateral meeting — a diplomatic conference — of leaders of South-Eastern Europe / Western Balkans. This initiative was later called the Brdo-Brijuni Process.

The process was launched to promote regional cooperation, resolve outstanding issues and further stabilize South-Eastern Europe through reforms and integration with the EU.³⁰

The first meeting took place on July 25, 2013 in Brdo near Kranj, Slovenia.

The current participants in the process are the members of the European Union Slovenia and Croatia, candidates and potential candidates for EU membership — Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.

At the 2020 summit, the participants called on the EU to speed up the integration process: "Through a more ambitious and purposeful enlargement process, the EU should more actively engage with all Western Balkans to encourage them to meet the well-established necessary

²⁷ About us, Regional Cooperation Council: <https://www.rcc.int/pages/2/about-us>

²⁸ CEFTA Parties, CEFTA: <https://cefta.int/cefta-parties-2/>

²⁹ Western Balkans Summit – CHAIR'S CONCLUSIONS, Die Bundesregierung, July 5, 2021: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/pressemitteilungen/western-balkans-summit-chair-s-conclusions-1939788>

³⁰ FM Kovač attends preparatory meeting for Brdo-Brijuni Process summit, Republic of Croatia Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, May 24, 2016: <http://www.mvep.hr/en/info-servis/press-releases/25820.html>

conditions for EU membership as soon as possible."³¹

BERLIN PROCESS

Following Croatia's accession to the European Union, the EU enlargement process has been put on hold.

In the summer of 2014, the new head of the European Commission, former Prime Minister of Luxembourg Jean-Claude Juncker, called for the suspension of the EU enlargement process for five years.

During his speech in the European Parliament on July 15, 2014, the newly elected head of the European Commission said: "There will be no enlargement for the next five years," adding that the EU should suspend the enlargement process to allow all the current 28 EU member states to consolidate the experience gained over the past years.³²

Following the announcement of a "moratorium" on the admission of new EU members, the Berlin Process was launched at the initiative of Germany (Chancellor Angela Merkel).³³ At the heart of Merkel's proposal is the regionally initiated Brdo-Bruni Process. However, while the latter was set up as a platform to discuss primarily political issues, the financially backed Berlin Process has become a driver of economic moderniza-

tion and integration in the region. All countries of the Brdo-Brijuni Process are involved in the Berlin Process, and the initiative is supported by the European Commission, international financial institutions and a number of EU member states.

The initiative is aimed at giving a new impetus in addressing bilateral issues among Western Balkan countries, strengthening political, economic and social cooperation at the regional level and continuing the de facto integration of the Western Balkans into the European Union, despite the announced "pause" in EU enlargement. In fact, the Berlin Process was largely conceived as a "training space" before gaining EU membership at a time when the prospect of accession remains uncertain.³⁴ The most ambitious goal of the Berlin Process is to establish a Common Regional Market (CRM) for all six countries of the Western Balkans, modeled on the EU Internal Market with its four freedoms.

In 2020, the leaders of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia adopted an Action Plan to create a common market by 2024.³⁵ As noted at the last Berlin Summit (July 2021), the Common Regional Market, by serving the economic modernization and implementation of EU principles and socioeconomic standards, prepares opportunities for the further integration of the Western Balkans into the EU Single Market.³⁶ An important component of the common market is the free movement of people within the region.

³¹ Brdo declaration, 2021, May 17, 2021: [https://www.predsednik.si/up-rs/uprs-eng.nsf/e21815fbba1b0422c1257af600468278/3f9cec5a18f415abc12586d900303808/\\$FILE/BRDO%20DECLARATION.pdf](https://www.predsednik.si/up-rs/uprs-eng.nsf/e21815fbba1b0422c1257af600468278/3f9cec5a18f415abc12586d900303808/$FILE/BRDO%20DECLARATION.pdf)

³² Nataliia Sokolovska, *Novoobranyi hlava Yevrokomisii: rozshyrennia YeS potribno pryzupynyty*, Deutsche Welle, August 15, 2014: <https://p.dw.com/p/1CdDm>

³³ *Merkel seeks to strengthen EU ties to Western Balkans*, EURACTIV, August 29, 2014: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/merkel-seeks-to-strengthen-eu-ties-to-western-balkans>

³⁴ Marko Savković, *Budućnost Berlinskog procesa: hoće li ekonomija i politika ići „ruku pod ruku“?*, BFPE, November 19, 2020: <https://bfpe.org/analize-i-publikacije/buducnost-berlinskog-procesa-hoce-li-ekonomija-i-politika-ici-ruku-pod-ruku/>

³⁵ *Sofia Summit Conclusions: Western Balkans Leaders remain dedicated to regional cooperation*, European Western Balkans, November 10, 2020: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/11/10/sofia-summit-conclusions-western-balkans-leaders-remain-dedicated-to-regional-cooperation/>

³⁶ *Western Balkans Summit – CHAIR'S CONCLUSIONS*, Die Bundesregierung, July 5, 2021: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/pressemitteilungen/western-balkans-summit-chair-s-conclusions-1939788>

Negotiations on concluding an agreement on the free movement of people with IDs are on-going.

In parallel, the process of economic integration in a narrower format was launched. In 2019, Prime Minister of Albania Edi Rama, Prime Minister of North Macedonia Zoran Zaev together with President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić in Novi Sad (Serbia) presented the idea of creating a "mini-Schengen."

On July 29, 2021, the "Mini-Schengen" regional cooperation initiative was renamed the "Open Balkan." It was announced that border controls among the three countries would be abolished by 2023.³⁷

As part of various initiatives within the Berlin Process, many joint regional sectoral projects have been implemented, ranging from the possibility of traveling only with an internal ID card between Albania and Serbia for citizens of these countries³⁸ to the abolition of roaming charges in the Western Balkans from 1 July 2021 (the next step being the abolition of roaming charges with the EU).³⁹ However, the ultimate goal of the program — ensuring the free movement of people, goods, services and capital in all the Western Balkans — has not been achieved so far.

According to analysts, the lack of trust and unresolved conflicts among the countries of the Western Balkans are the main obstacles to strengthening regional cooperation and economic integration.

In particular, the creation of a common market is compounded by the fact that not all countries in the region have recognized each other: Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina do not recognize Kosovo.

Besides, there are mounting fears among regional leaders that the multilateral track is gradually removing European integration from the EU's agenda as a two-way process between the candidate country and the EU.⁴⁰

³⁷ "Mini Schengen" renamed "Open Balkan"; Vučić, Rama and Zaev sign three documents, European Western Balkans, July 29, 2021: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/07/29/mini-schengen-renamed-open-balkan-vucic-rama-and-zaev-sign-three-documents/>

³⁸ Vlada Srbije: Građani Albanije u Srbiju sa ličnom kartom, Radio Slobodna Evropa, November 19, 2020: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/30959128.html>

³⁹ Dženana Halimović, Bregu: Potpuno bez naknade za roming od 1. jula na Zapadnom Balkanu, Radio Slobodna Evropa, May 1, 2021: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/intervju-majlinda-bregu-roming-1jul/31231549.html>

⁴⁰ Radmilo Marković, Mini-Schengen: tko će imati koristi?, Deutsche Welle, November 15, 2020: <https://www.dw.com/hr/mini-schengen-tko-%C4%87e-imati-koristi/a-55605851>

POST-WAR SETTLEMENT AND EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

OVERALL EU APPROACHES TO CONFLICT SETTLEMENT

As has already been noted, the complex post-war relations of the countries of the region pose a major constraint to the European integration of the Western Balkans. Progress in achieving EU membership for candidate countries is closely intertwined with the process of normalizing relations with neighbors involved in the military confrontation.

The European Community has been quite active in resolving the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia as well as in fostering post-war reconstruction and reconciliation. Following the decision in principle on a European perspective for the Western Balkans in the early 2000s with the launch of the Stabilization and Association Process, the EU's involvement in regional normalization can be assessed as very high, if not decisive. For example, in 2004, the EU military mission replaced the NATO contingent in Bosnia and Herzegovina. That said, it should be noted that after 2013, attention to the region has considerably decreased, which is acknowledged in both the EU and the Western Balkans.

A special tool of the EU in the peace process is the institution of EU Special Representatives, who advance the policies and interests of the European Union in troubled regions and countries and play an active role in efforts to strengthen peace, stability and the rule of law.⁴¹

In the Western Balkans, the EU has Special Representatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue and other Western Balkan regional Issues. The EU's current special envoy to the Kosovo-Serbia talks is Slovakia's longtime foreign minister, Miroslav Lajčák. His activities can be called shuttle diplomacy and mainly consist in ensuring the continuation of the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina.⁴²

POST-WAR SETTLEMENT. BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

On 9 July 2004, pursuant to a UN Security Council Resolution, the European Union launched its own military mission, Operation ALTHEA, in Bosnia and Herzegovina (formally called "European Union Force in Bosnia and Herzegovina" (EUFOR)). This is the only EU military mission in Europe, whose primary goal is to ensure peace and stability in BiH through the implementation of the military aspects of the Dayton Peace Agreement.

The launch of the European military mission in BiH was the result of NATO's decision to end its SFOR peacekeeping operation. UN Security Council Resolution 1575 of 22 November 2004 enabled the creation of a multinational stabilization force (EUFOR) as the successor to the SFOR. EU forces in BiH have received a mixed mandate from the UN and the EU.⁴³ It is noteworthy that the EU military mission replaced the NATO contingent in Bosnia and Herzegovina a

⁴¹ *EU Special Representatives*, European Union External Action, May 31, 2021:

https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/3606/EU%20Special%20Representatives

⁴² Branislav Stanicek, *Belgrade-Pristina dialogue The rocky road towards a comprehensive normalisation agreement*, European Parliament, May 2021: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/689371/EPRS_BRI\(2021\)689371_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/689371/EPRS_BRI(2021)689371_EN.pdf)

⁴³ *About EUFOR*, European union force, January 14, 2021: <https://www.euforbih.org/index.php/about-eufor>

year after the Thessaloniki Summit, which approved a course for European integration of the Western Balkans.

Following the entry into force of the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) between the EU and BiH in June 2005, the EU military mission became part of the European integration process in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The purpose of Operation ALTHEA is currently declared as assistance in creating the conditions for achieving the long-term political goal of building a stable, viable, peaceful and multiethnic BiH, cooperating peacefully with its neighbors and continuously moving towards membership in the European Union. It is noted that Operation ALTHEA is directly aimed at supporting Bosnia and Herzegovina's progress towards EU integration.⁴⁴

POST-WAR SETTLEMENT. SERBIA, KOSOVO

The European Union Rule of Law Mission (EULEX) has operated in Kosovo since 2008⁴⁵ and is the largest civilian mission under the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy. Following Kosovo's declaration of independence, the EULEX took over most of the responsibilities of the UNMIK, the UN-Interim Civilian Administration in Kosovo, which was established after the end of hostilities in 2000.⁴⁶

As part of its current mandate, the EULEX monitors the rule of law and has limited executive functions. The EULEX supports the Specialized Chambers of Kosovo — the Specialized Court and the Specialized Prosecutor's Office — in The Hague. These institutions function under Kosovo's jurisdiction and have a specific mandate and purview over crimes against humanity and war crimes committed in Kosovo during the armed conflict between January 1, 1998 and December 31, 2000 by citizens of Kosovo or the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The Specialized Chambers employ international specialists,⁴⁷ and the institutions themselves are funded by international donors, primarily the European Union.⁴⁸

The Kosovo Assembly voted to establish the Specialized Chambers in August 2015 at the urging of the EU. Following the decision, Federica Mogherini, the then High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, called it a step forward in Kosovo's European path. "While recognising that this step by MPs of the Kosovo Assembly was not easy, it is a sign of responsibility and determination to establish the truth and make decisions compatible with Kosovo's European path," Mogherini said in a special statement.⁴⁹

It was believed that justice for the victims of war crimes would foster regional reconciliation⁵⁰ in line with the general principles of the European integration process in the Western Balkans.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ About EULEX, European union external actions: <https://www.eulex-kosovo.eu/?page=2,60>

⁴⁶ Vučić: Jedna velika sila kreće u zvanično traženje povlačenja KFOR-a i UNMIK-a, Radio Slobodna Evropa, May 13, 2021: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/vu%C4%8Di%C4%87-jedna-velika-sila-kre%C4%87e-u-zvani%C4%8Dno-tra%C5%BEenje-povla%C4%8Denja-kfor-a-i-unmik-a/31253008.html>

⁴⁷ Kosovo Specialist Chambers & Specialist Prosecutor's Office: <https://www.scp-ks.org/en>

⁴⁸ Kosovo Specialist Chambers, Just Peace: <https://justpeacethehague.com/en/partner/kosovo-specialist-chambers/>

⁴⁹ Statement by High Representative/Vice President Federica Mogherini after adoption by the Kosovo Assembly of the Law on Specialist Chambers and Specialist Prosecutor's Office, EEAS, August 3, 2015: https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/3230/node/3230_nl

⁵⁰ Statement of EU Embassies/Offices, EUSR/EU Office and US Embassy in Kosovo on the adoption of constitutional amendment and law on the establishment of the Specialist Chambers, U.S. Embassy in Kosovo, August 3, 2015: <https://xk.usembassy.gov/joint-statement/>

After a decision on the special chambers, the EU-Kosovo Stabilization and Association Agreement was signed in October 2015.⁵¹

In the European Union, the normalization of relations with Kosovo is identified as a key element in the progress of negotiations and Serbia's accession to the EU.⁵²

In April 2013, under the auspices of the European Union, the heads of government of Serbia and Kosovo initialed the Brussels Agreement aimed at normalizing relations between the two parties.⁵³ Later on, in September 2013, the Stabilization and Association Agreement between the EU and Serbia came into force, and in six months, formal negotiations on Serbia's accession to the European Union began.⁵⁴

⁵¹ *Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) between the European Union and Kosovo signed*, European Council, October 27, 2015: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2015/10/27/kosovo-eu-stabilisation-association-agreement>

⁵² *Enlargement reports: MEPs fully support Western Balkans' European future*, European Parliament, March 25, 2021 poky: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20210322IPR00528/enlargement-reports-meps-fully-support-western-balkans-european-future>

⁵³ Bojana Barlovac, *Kosovo and Serbia Reach Historic Deal in Brussels*, BalkanInsights, April 19, 2013: <https://balkaninsight.com/2013/04/19/kosovo-and-serbia-may-seal-eu-deal/>

⁵⁴ *European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, Serbia*, European Commission: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/detailed-country-information/serbia_en

DISPUTES BETWEEN CANDIDATE COUNTRIES AND EU MEMBERS

NORTH MACEDONIA — GREECE

The dialogue over the accession of the Western Balkans indicates the emergence of a new trend: the expansion of the list of bilateral issues that need to be resolved before accession or even the formal start of negotiations. The countries of the region which are already members of the EU are putting the bilateral agenda into the enlargement negotiations. These are humanitarian issues related to national and historical policies.

At times, these issues were resolved fairly quickly through bilateral negotiations. For instance, in 2017, Serbia agreed with Croatia and Bulgaria on school textbooks for the Croatian and Serbian minorities, which unblocked the negotiation process with the EU in the section "Culture and Education."⁵⁵

North Macedonia has had to travel a much more difficult path. The points of contention between the former Yugoslav republic and neighboring Greece included such conceptual topics as state symbols (the flag), prominent historical figures and the name of the country. Greece insisted that ancient Macedonia, Alexander the Great, and the symbol of the Star of Vergina were integral parts of Hellenic culture and its historical heritage. Therefore, the use of these symbols to legitimize the FYR Macedonia was considered

unacceptable. Greece imposed economic sanctions on the FYR Macedonia and then blocked the start of the country's NATO and EU accession talks.

Only after reaching a compromise with Athens was Skopje's Euro-integration and Euro-Atlantic movement unblocked. The Macedonian leadership had to first abandon the flag with the Star of Vergina,⁵⁶ then the interpretation of Alexander the Great as a national hero and the use of his name in the title of objects (a highway and an airport).⁵⁷ The negotiation process culminated in the renaming of the country from Macedonia to North Macedonia.⁵⁸

Negotiations, including those led by a UN representative, on renaming the country lasted 27 years.⁵⁹

NORTH MACEDONIA — BULGARIA

Thanks to the lifting of the Greek blockade, North Macedonia was able to join NATO but not to the EU. The start of accession talks is now blocked by its other neighbor, Bulgaria.

The controversy revolves around the interpretation of historical events, national heroes, the origin of the Macedonian language and Macedonians in general (which, according to the Bulgar-

⁵⁵ *Saglasnost članica EU za otvaranje poglavlja 26*, Vlada Republike Srbije, January 20, 2017: <http://socijalnoukljucivanje.gov.rs/rs/saglasnost-clanica-eu-za-otvaranje-poglavlja-26/>

⁵⁶ *Flag of North Macedonia*, Britannica: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/flag-of-North-Macedonia>

⁵⁷ *Z aeroportu u stolytsi Makedonii prybraly statuiu polkovodtsia Aleksandra Makedonskoho*, Radio Liberty, March 1, 2018: <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news/29071307.html>

⁵⁸ *Makedoniia i Hretsii: chomu krainy 27 rokov sperechalysia cherez nazvu*, BBC News Ukraine, January 25, 2019: <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/news-46989552>

⁵⁹ Александр Чомовски, *Знамето – спорен симбол во Македонија*, Deutsche Welle, May 3, 2011: <https://p.dw.com/p/117zD>

ian side, emerged as a result of the anti-Bulgarian project of the Yugoslav leadership.⁶⁰

In 2019, the Bulgarian parliament unanimously adopted a tough declaration warning Skopje that Sofia would not tolerate distortions of historical events, documents and artifacts, as well as the roles and views of prominent figures in Bulgarian history.⁶¹

The Bulgarian leadership emphasizes the fairness of its demands, which, in their opinion, are based on the desire to protect the principles on which the EU is built.⁶²

Bulgaria vetoed a decision to open EU membership talks with North Macedonia in November 2020.

Skopje is vehemently opposed to rethinking its identity.⁶³

The EU's position on this issue consists in the need to reach bilateral compromise agreements, as stated in the latest resolution of the European Parliament.⁶⁴ According to the document, "MEPs regret that Bulgaria and North Macedonia have yet to come to an understanding on outstanding bilateral issues and encourage them to reach a compromise over an action plan of concrete measures to resolve this impasse."

Attempts by the EU to mediate a compromise solution have so far failed.⁶⁵ As of early June 2021, Bulgaria continues blocking the start of EU accession talks with North Macedonia.⁶⁶

⁶⁰ Borys Heorhiiivskiy, *Superechka na Balkanakh: za shcho Bolhariia blokuie Pivnichnii Makedonii vstup do YeES*, Deutsche Welle, September 24, 2020: <https://p.dw.com/p/3itnO>

⁶¹ Georgi Gotev, *Facing pressure, Bulgaria tries to explain its North Macedonia veto*, EURACTIV, May 12, 2021: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/facing-pressure-bulgaria-tries-to-explain-its-north-macedonia-veto/>

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Заев: Не ни треба Европската унија по цена на македонскиот идентитет и јазик, Канал 5 ТВ, May 5, 2021: https://kanal5.com.mk/zaev-ne-ni-treba-evropskata-unija-po-cena-na-makedonskiot-identitet-i-jazik/a473344?fbclid=IwAR3zQD5MHcB8_K7nSKkR-e_hpQenLf5XRI9cVznHGOoSbBk8gkfd02NI8YM

⁶⁴ *Enlargement reports: MEPs fully support Western Balkans' European future*, European Parliament, March 25, 2021: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20210322IPR00528/enlargement-reports-meps-fully-support-western-balkans-european-future>

⁶⁵ *Várhelyi and Silva travel to Sofia and Skopje in an attempt to break the deadlock*, European Western Balkans, May 21, 2021: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/05/21/varhelyi-and-silva-travel-to-sofia-and-skopje-in-an-attempt-to-break-the-deadlock/>

⁶⁶ *Bulgaria: There is no change in Bulgaria's position regarding North Macedonia said acting MFA Stoev*, Independent Balkan News Agency, May 21, 2021: <https://balkan.eu.com/bulgaria-there-is-no-change-in-bulgarias-position-regarding-north-macedonia-said-acting-mfa-stoev/>

CURRENT STATE OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Today, the process of accession of the Western Balkans to the European Union has virtually run aground. Following the decisive EU Summit in Thessaloniki in 2003, only one country in the region, Croatia, joined the European Union by mid-2013; another one, that can be considered close to the region, was the former Yugoslav Republic of Slovenia. Only two of the six Western Balkan countries, Serbia and Montenegro, have begun formal talks.

That said, Montenegro has closed only three chapters in 8 years of negotiations (two of them were opened and closed on the same day), and Serbia has closed two in 6 years. According to experts, one of the reasons for such low performance is the lack of EU's certainty about admitting new members and deepening integration with the Western Balkans, which reduces the incentive for reforms. Analysts at the European Stability Initiative point out that the reform efforts of the candidate countries' governments without a clear advancement towards deeper integration into the EU will be reminiscent of "a hamster in a wheel."⁶⁷ Their recommendation was to radically reconsider the negotiation process (opening and closing chapters) and provide a clear intermediate goal — integration into the EU Internal Market.

Public support for European integration in the two countries that are formally negotiating differs. According to a public opinion poll, if a ref-

erendum on Montenegro's membership in the European Union were held in early 2021, 79.6 percent of citizens would vote for Montenegro's accession to the EU.⁶⁸ In Serbia, slightly more than half of the respondents (52 percent) were ready to vote for EU membership at the end of 2020, with youth showing the strongest support for EU integration.⁶⁹

The European Union has publicly emphasized the invariability of the EU's enlargement policy and the European perspective of the Western Balkans.⁷⁰ However, as discussions at recent summits have shown, EU member states are not ready to discuss a possible timetable for admitting new members. In the absence of consensus, Brussels is focusing on strengthening ties (connectivity) between the EU and the Western Balkans, supporting integration projects within the region, increasing investment and stimulating transformation.

The Declaration of the Zagreb Summit of May 2020 does not contain provisions on EU enlargement policy and integration into the EU's internal market; instead, a more restrained wording is used to bring the Western Balkans closer to the EU's single market. In Zagreb, EU leaders stressed the importance of continuing reforms in key areas such as the fight against corruption, organized crime, the rule of law and freedom of speech. The call to the leadership of the countries of the region to carefully and resolutely en-

⁶⁷ *Hamster in the Wheel – Credibility and EU Balkan policy*, European Stability Initiative, January 15, 2020: <https://www.esiweb.org/publications/hamster-wheel-credibility-and-eu-balkan-policy>

⁶⁸ *Na referendumu bi 79,6 odsto građana glasalo da Crna Gora pristupi EU*, CDM, January 15, 2021: <https://m.cdm.me/politika/na-referendumu-bi-796-odsto-gradana-glasalo-da-crna-gora-pristupi-eu/>

⁶⁹ *Snažna podrška za pristupanje EU među građanima Srbije, pokazuje decembarska anketa kompanije Ninamedia za Delegaciju EU u Srbiji*, EU u Srbiji, December 30, 2020: <https://europa.rs/snazna-podrska-za-pristupanje-eu-medju-gradjanima-srbije-pokazuje-decembarska-anketa-kompanije-ninamedia-za-delegaciju-eu-u-srbiji/>

⁷⁰ *Borrell: EU Ministers for more engagement with the Western Balkans, new meeting soon*, European Western Balkans, May 10, 2021: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/05/10/borrell-eu-ministers-for-more-engagement-with-the-western-balkans-new-meeting-soon/>

sure the implementation of the principles of democracy in political life and respect for human rights remains an integral part of the statements of EU representatives. In October 2020, the European Commission approved a comprehensive Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, aimed at spurring the long-term recovery of the region after the pandemic as well as supporting green and digital transformation.

A separate item is the synchronization of foreign and security policies of the candidate countries with the official position of the EU. Controversial issues that have arisen in recent years include economic cooperation between the region and China (mainly Serbia and Montenegro), Serbia's active military cooperation with the Russian Federation and Serbia's refusal to join EU sanctions against Russia.

THE WESTERN BALKANS AND THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP

DIVISION OF REGIONS

In fact, the establishment of the Eastern Partnership⁷¹ in 2009 clearly divided the EU's neighbors in South-Eastern and Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus into two groups.

A The countries that have been given the membership prospect. Those are the Western Balkans.

- Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Kosovo (partially recognized)
- North Macedonia
- Serbia
- Montenegro
- Albania.

B The countries that do not have an officially approved EU membership prospect. These are the former Soviet republics:

- Armenia
- Azerbaijan
- Belarus
- Georgia
- Moldova
- Ukraine.

At first, Moldova (as an apparently South-Eastern European state) managed to partially integrate into the Western Balkan European integration process. For instance, Moldova joined the CEFTA (according to unofficial information, thanks to Romania's efforts). But further cooperation in the political sphere between Chisinau and Brussels was institutionalized in the format of the Eastern

Partnership, together with Ukraine, Georgia and other EaP participants, and not with the Western Balkans.

The Eastern Partnership was not conceived as and is not an instrument of European integration or the process of joining the EU.⁷² Relations with the EU's six eastern neighbors are developing within the framework of the EU's neighborhood policy, not enlargement policy, as is the case with the Western Balkans. The Eastern Partnership is an EU initiative on regional cooperation in the framework of the European Neighborhood Policy and aims to deepen and strengthen relations between the European Union, its member states and the six eastern neighbors, whilst also promoting reforms in the partner countries.

The Association Agreements with the EU, which have been signed by the three countries in the east — Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia — differ from the Stabilization and Association Agreements of the Western Balkans. The documents have been signed as part of two different EU policies: the Stabilization and Association Process, which is the path to accession to the European Union, and the European Neighborhood Policy, which is not a mechanism for joining the EU. At the same time, the Association Agreements with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia have been more extensive and detailed; these are the largest agreements the European Union has ever signed with third countries. The implementation of the Association Agreement should result in the gradual integration of the countries into the EU internal market.

⁷¹ *Eastern Partnership*, European Council: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eastern-partnership/>

⁷² *Myths about the Eastern Partnership – Factsheet*, European Union, April 22, 2019: https://eeas.europa.eu/diplomatic-network/eastern-partnership/35712/myths-about-eastern-partnership-factsheet_en

NEW PRIORITIES OF THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP AND THE ASSOCIATED TRIO

On March 18, 2020, the European Commission and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy presented proposals for the long-term political goals of the Eastern Partnership beyond 2020. According to the official statement of the European Commission, the proposals *Eastern Partnership: new policy objectives for beyond 2020* were formed on the basis of consultations on the future development of the Eastern Partnership in 2019 with broad and inclusive participation of EU member states, partner countries, civil society organizations, scientists, businesses and financial institutions. It is emphasized that, in general, the parties have reached a consensus that the current political program of the Eastern Partnership is strong and provides tangible benefits for the people.⁷³

The new priorities of the EaP propose focusing on environmental and digital transformations as well as building an economy that "works for all." Among other things, these include⁷⁴:

- increasing trade;
- strengthening ties and deepening economic integration with Azerbaijan, Belarus, Armenia, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine;
- strengthening democratic institutions;
- strengthening the rule of law;
- strengthening ecological and climatic stability;
- supporting digital transformation;

- promoting a just and inclusive society — creating an economy that works for all, including increasing employment opportunities for young people, and promoting gender equality.

The last three priorities are the new directions in the joint work of the EU and its partners within the EaP framework. These proposals are expected to be approved at the next Eastern Partnership Summit, which has been postponed due to pandemic restrictions. However, the events of the last year and a half (hostilities between Azerbaijan and Armenia, Belarus' withdrawal from the EaP) call into question the possibility of forming a common regional agenda for the Eastern Partnership countries.

The issue of transforming the EaP in line with new geopolitical realities and the progress of the associated countries along with the need to unify the EU's approaches to the Western Balkans and the EaP, has been the subject of intense discussions at both expert and political levels. Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and their EU counterparts advocate a clear European perspective are in favor of creating new or transforming existing formats to ensure the EU's gradual integration with the countries that have signed an Association Agreement with it (Associated Trio).

At the end of April 2021, the EuroNest Interparliamentary Assembly considered a resolution — recommendations for the forthcoming Eastern Partnership Summit — on the European perspective of the Associated Trio. The draft document proposed⁷⁵:

- providing a European perspective for the EaP countries that are successfully making strides in reforms, in line with the spirit of the "more for more" strategy;

⁷³ EU – EaP: Beyond 2020: <https://trello.com/c/6zFx02bh/1-press-release>

⁷⁴ *Eastern Partnership*, EU Neighbours: <https://www.euneighbours.eu/en/east/eu-in-action/easternpartnership>.https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/1_en_act_part1_v6.pdf

⁷⁵ Volodymyr Ariiev, *Zakryttia Yevropy: yak druzi Ukrainy zaznaly porazky u EuroNest*, Yevropeiska pravda, April 26, 2021: <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/experts/2021/04/26/7122566/>

- "linking" Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia to the process of European integration of the Western Balkans.

Although not adopted, the resolution received a simple majority of votes, showing strong support for the proposed approach in both the EU and the EaP.

Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova have taken steps to institutionalize the Associated Trio. In May 2021, the foreign ministers of these countries signed a Memorandum on the establishment of the "trio"⁷⁶ "as a form of enhanced cooperation and dialogue between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of the three EU associated partners and the European Union on issues of common interest related to the European integration of their respective countries, including cooperation in the framework of the Eastern Partnership." The representatives of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia stressed, inter alia, the need for the European Union to take a "more for more" approach aimed at creating progressive incentives for integration and reforms. Other aspects deemed appropriate include creating a support scheme for the Eastern Partnership countries, similar to the one used for the Western Balkans.⁷⁷

The Associated Trio has put forward another proposal to strengthen security cooperation and increase the EU's involvement in the peace settlement. The participants stated their intention to continue working to bolster the EU's role

in promoting peaceful conflict resolution in appropriate formats and platforms.⁷⁸

In the case of Ukraine, some of the initiatives in this regard are:

- The Crimea Platform, a forum for mobilizing international efforts to support Ukraine in the issue of Crimea's de-occupation, which is scheduled to be launched on the eve of Independence Day on August 24, 2021,⁷⁹ and
- the introduction of the position of the European Union Special Representative for Crimea.⁸⁰

EU PARTICIPATION IN THE CONFLICT SETTLEMENT PROCESS

In the reasoning of the need to accelerate the European integration of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, there is a statement about the higher progress of the Associated Trio in a number of indicators compared to some countries in the Western Balkans (macroeconomic indicators, trade policy and market relations, sectoral cooperation).⁸¹

However, as the experience of European integration processes in the Western Balkans shows, a formal approach to a country's compliance / non-compliance with the criteria is not decisive in deciding whether to start the European integration process. The goal of European inte-

⁷⁶ Dmytro Kuleba: *Ukraina, Hruzii ta Moldova zapochatkuvaly Asotsiiovane Trio*, Uriadovi portal, May 17, 2021: <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/news/dmitro-kuleba-ukrayina-gruziya-ta-moldova-zapochatkuvali-asocijovane-trio>

⁷⁷ *Ukraina, Hruzii i Moldova stvorily Asotsiiovane Trio dlia uspishnoi yevrointehratsii*, Ukrinform, May 17, 2021: <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-politics/3246876-ukraina-gruzia-i-moldova-stvorili-asocijovane-trio-dla-uspishnoi-evrointracii.html>

⁷⁸ *Memorandum pro vzaiemorozuminnia mizh MZS Ukrainy, Hruzii ta Moldovy shchodo zapochatkuvannya posylenoho spivrobotnytstva z pytan yevropeiskoi intehratsii — Asotsiiovanoho Trio*, Ministerstvo zakordonnykh sprav Ukrainy, May 17, 2021: <https://mfa.gov.ua/news/memorandum-pro-vzayemorozuminnya-mizh-mzs-ukrayini-gruziji-ta-moldovi-shchodo-zapochatkuvannya-posylenogo-spivrobotnictva-z-pitan-yevropejskoyi-integracij-i-asocijovanogo-trio>

⁷⁹ *Prezydent na sesii Henasamblei OON zaprosyv doluchytysia do stvorennia mizhnarodnoi platformy shchodo deokupatsii Krummy*, Office of the President of Ukraine, September 23, 2020: <https://www.president.gov.ua/news/prezident-na-sesiji-genasambleji-oon-zaprosiv-doluchitisya-d-63905>

⁸⁰ Talha Yavuz, *'Turkey to be good partner in Crimean platform'*, Anadolu Agency, November 30, 2020: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/-turkey-to-be-good-partner-in-crimean-platform-/2060766>

⁸¹ Michael Emerson, *Ukraina ne hirsha za Balkany: yak Kyievu vesty dialoh z Yes pro perspektyvu chlenstva*, Yevropeiska pravda, March 15, 2021: <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/experts/2021/03/15/7120897>

gration in the Western Balkans is to stimulate countries to resolve disputes peacefully and to normalize relations in an explosive region.

The European Union's strong involvement in conflict resolution and peacekeeping in the Western Balkans is a key difference that distinguishes EU policy towards the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership region, especially Ukraine.

Therefore, in addition to analyzing the level of readiness to join the EU, Ukraine, just like Moldova and Georgia, should consider the security component, namely the existence of ongoing and potential conflicts and the role of the EU in ensuring regional stability. **Given that all three Associated Trio countries have unresolved conflicts with Russia and war is raging in eastern Ukraine, the comparison will obviously not be in favor of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia vis-à-vis the Western Balkans, even Kosovo or Bosnia and Herzegovina, because there, armed conflict ended decades ago, peace treaties are in place and security is provided by international peacekeepers and missions, including the EU.**

It should be noted that the EU as an organization has not been actively involved in the peace process in Ukraine. The instrument used by the European Union to influence Russia is sanctions pressure. EU members France and Germany participate in the Normandy format, but the EU itself is not represented in the negotiation process.

Ukraine has an EU Security Mission, the EUAM, but it is an Advisory Mission deployed to assist the Ukrainian authorities exclusively in reforming the civil security sector.⁸²

The situation is slightly different in Moldova and Georgia. The European Union is represented in the 5+2 negotiation format on the Transnistrian settlement, together with the United States and

the OSCE, Russia, Ukraine, Moldova and Transnistria.

In Georgia, the work of the EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus and the crisis in Georgia is modeled after the activities of his counterparts in the Western Balkans and some other regions.

A wider involvement of the European Union in the process of peace settlement in the region, reconstruction and stabilization can be an incentive to review EU policy towards the eastern neighborhood.

⁸² Yevropeiska intehratsiia. Konsultatyvna misiia YeS z reformuvannia tsyvilnoho sektoru bezpeky Ukrainy (EUAM), State Border Service of Ukraine: <https://dpsu.gov.ua/ua/konsultativna-misiya-s-z-reformuvannya-civilnogo-sektoru-bezpeki-ukraini-euam/>

RECOMMENDATIONS

USING THE EXPERIENCE OF THE WESTERN BALKANS IN EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

PROSPECTIVE EU INTEGRATION STRATEGY

The usage of tools and mechanisms for European integration applied in the Western Balkans currently has limited potential due to two reasons.

The first is the clear division of the two regions — the Western Balkans and the EaP — by the European Union. The lack of the status of potential candidates for EU membership in the EaP countries, which have association agreements with the EU, significantly limits their access to EU projects and instruments, including financial ones, that are open to the Western Balkans. **There is an urgent need to overcome this difference in approaches to ensure a more intensive and effective advancement of Ukraine (and other associated countries) on the path to European integration.**

The second reason is that the process of accession of the Western Balkan countries to the EU is now virtually halted. Given the significant changes in the EU's approach to admitting new members, even the study of Croatia's successful experience⁸³ has its limitations. At the same time, in the absence of progress on the path to membership, the definition of a certain intermediate goal of European integration is becoming an urgent issue for the Western Balkans and Ukraine. A gradual integration into the EU internal market is believed to be one such goal.

Although the European integration experience of the Western Balkans does not allow us to set out a "clear formula" that will ensure successful

integration, we can clearly identify areas where progress largely depends on the position of European officials on the country's readiness for membership talks and the stance of EU member states on admitting new members. It is about ensuring the rule of law, fighting crime and corruption and adhering to the principles of democratic governance. The experience of the Western Balkans also signals the growing role of the so-called "issues of the humanitarian bloc," particularly historical disputes with neighbors, which may impede European integration.

Of particular interest to Ukraine are initiatives of the EU and individual member states aimed at bringing the Western Balkans closer to the EU, accelerating reforms and improving the living standards of the region's citizens. Although these initiatives (especially the Berlin Process) are positioned as complementing the institutional process of each country's integration into the EU (implementation of *acquis communautaire*), it is these initiatives that have become the driving force of European integration in the absence of progress towards formal membership.

Ukraine (along with Moldova and Georgia) has a free trade agreement with the EU, is gradually adapting its legislation to the European *acquis* and is enjoying a visa-free regime for short-term travels. Ukraine's approach to European integration is based on the principle of sectoral integration into the EU, specified as a "concept of five visa-free regimes": an aviation visa-free regime (conclusion of the Common Aviation Area Agreement), an energy visa-free regime (joining the ENTSO-E), a customs visa-free regime (accession to the Convention on a Com-

⁸³ Exchange of experience in European integration and conflict settlement is an important element of intergovernmental and interparliamentary dialogue between Ukraine and Croatia.

mon Transit Procedure) and a digital visa-free regime (Digital Single Market).⁸⁴ The same logic of gradual steps underlies the EU's approach to the integration of the Western Balkans, which are already part of the common markets that Ukraine aspires to.⁸⁵ In 2010, Ukraine acceded to the Energy Community Treaty,⁸⁶ which launched market integration in the key economic sector. Accession to the Treaty establishing the European Transport Community is also promising. This will, however, provide for the expansion of the Treaty, as only the countries of the Western Balkans and the EU are currently members.

At the same time, Ukraine, unlike the Western Balkans (and Moldova), is not a member of regional formats of cooperation (SEECP, Regional Cooperation Council) and is not willing to join them for now. In the past, there have been attempts to use this tool: in 2008, Ukraine participated in the Forum of the Regional Cooperation Council, was granted observer status and joined the work in two thematic groups (transport and civil society). However, according to experts, the reluctance and lack of readiness of Ukrainian ministries to work in a multilateral format and implement joint projects nullified Ukraine's participation in the Regional Cooperation Council. The same reasons explain the rather low activity of Ukraine in the framework of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region.⁸⁷ In order to remedy this situation, in 2020, Ukraine applied for the chairmanship of the Strategy in 2022.

The example of the Western Balkans shows that participation in regional cooperation formats

can complement and strengthen the individual European integration track and lay the groundwork for effective participation in EU projects and initiatives. Thus, Ukraine's accession to regional formats can be useful for deepening ties with individual EU member states, which is extremely important in the context of European integration.

Integration projects with the EU in the economic field, which are essential for practical rapprochement and strengthening ties between Ukraine and member states, should be part of the overall strategic policy framework for Ukraine's EU membership path. The central component of this policy framework is gaining the status of a potential candidate for EU membership.

The existing key recommendations aimed at deepening and expediting Ukraine's European integration can be summarized as follows:

- Introduction of the "more for more" principle by the EU to Ukraine, along with Moldova and Georgia, which would take into account the full range of reform efforts and apply not only to financial instruments but also to political decisions.
- Unification of approaches to the Western Balkans and the Associated Trio: inclusion of "associated countries" into the EU enlargement policy.
- Extension to the EaP countries seeking full membership in the European Union of EU

⁸⁴ Olha Muzyka, *Shmyhal anonsuvav 5 novykh bezviziv z YeS*, 24 kanal, June 27, 2021: https://24tv.ua/ukrayina-zbirayetsya-domovitis-shhe-pro-5-beviziv-ukrayina-novini_n1669120

⁸⁵ The Western Balkans are part of the ENTSO-E, Common Aviation Area: Serbia and North Macedonia have joined the Convention on a Common Transit Procedure.

⁸⁶ The institutional structure of the Energy Community, established in 2006, repeats the internal structure of the EU. For candidate countries and potential candidates, membership in it was meant to be an important step in joining the EU, since it dealt with establishing a single market in the key economic sector. Later on, however, the Energy Community was opened to admit other EU neighbors. Its aim was to create an integrated pan-European energy market in accordance with EU norms. EU membership also gives certain security guarantees, envisaging coordinated mutual assistance in case of serious disruptions in the functioning of energy networks.

⁸⁷ The Danube Strategy covers three Western Balkan countries (Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina), nine EU member states, Ukraine and Moldova.

programs, initiatives and financial instruments to which the Western Balkans have access.

- Active participation in existing regional formats of cooperation and the launch of new ones to enlist support of EU member states for the European integration of the Associated Trio.
- Wider involvement of the EU in resolving regional conflicts in the Eastern Partnership and expanding security cooperation. In the case of Ukraine, it deals with:
 - ▷ appointing an EU Special Representative for Ukraine (with a mandate covering the de-occupation of Donbas and Crimea);
 - ▷ Ukraine's accession to the European Peace Facility (EPF⁸⁸), set up to help partner countries improve their security situation⁸⁹.
 - ▷ Ukraine's participation in the implementation of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) projects⁹⁰ with reference to the EU decision on the admission of third countries to its PESCO defense initiatives⁹¹.
 - ▷ expanding EUAM's mandate and the presence of a mission in areas near the line of demarcation.

PROSPECTIVE EU INTEGRATION TACTIC

The first stage:

- Strengthening cooperation and coordination between the three countries of the Associated Trio, even in the absence of a positive EU decision to single out the three associate partners in a separate cooperation mechanism.
- Unifying the Associated Trio into a single process with public mobilization of EU member states in support of the trio's accession to the EU, following the example of the Western Balkan Brdo-Brijuni Process but more focused on European integration than regional cooperation.

Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, together with Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and other countries that will join the process (it would be logical to expect that Romania will join) can jointly launch this initiative.

Following the example of the Western Balkans, it is important that the drivers of the initiative should be EU members, who will have to act as "lobbyists" for the European integration of the eastern neighbors in Brussels.

- Gaining Ukraine's (possibly Georgia) participation in the South-East European Cooperation Process and ensuring their active involvement in the activities of the Regional

⁸⁸ The financial envelope of the new instrument for 2021–2027 will amount to €5 billion. The EPF will cover all of the EU's external actions having military or defensive components within the framework of the Common Security and Defense Policy.

⁸⁹ *EU sets up the European Peace Facility*, European Council, March 22, 2021: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/03/22/eu-sets-up-the-european-peace-facility/>

⁹⁰ *Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO)*: <https://pesco.europa.eu/>

⁹¹ Alexandra Brzozowski, *EU seals accord to let third countries into future joint military projects*, EURACTIV, October 29, 2020: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/eu-seals-accord-to-let-third-countries-join-future-joint-military-projects/>

Cooperation Council through the implementation of joint projects, for instance, in infrastructure.⁹²

- Initiating joint projects of Ukraine with the member states of the Process, particularly in the field of infrastructure, green transformation and innovation.

It should be noted that funding for the "first stage" of European integration can be provided exclusively or mainly by the participants of these processes and not from EU funds, since the use of the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance is currently only possible for candidates (at least potential ones), and the EaP budget is not intended to support measures aimed at EU accession of its participants.

The second stage:

- Obtaining the status of a potential candidate for EU membership.

The potential candidate status enables the full use of the capacity of EU programs and projects aimed at deepening integration and opens access to pre-accession assistance resources.

Therefore, the next step is:

- Making the Associated Trio countries eligible for funding from the EU Pre-Accession Assistance budget.

This stage, like the next one, can be realized only with the assistance and support of the EU (i.e., provided there is a consensus on this issue among all EU member states).

The third stage:

- introducing a special European integration project for the Associated Trio based on the example of the Berlin Process for the Western Balkans.

At this stage, it is important to have influential supporters of the integration of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, the leader and driver of the Associated Trio's European integration inside the EU, following the example of Germany's role for the Western Balkans.

KEY INSIGHTS FROM THE PROCESS OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Unresolved bilateral issues with EU members can hamper the European integration process even if all "traditional" EU requirements are met in good faith. The need to settle bilateral disputes with EU member states in order to make progress on the path towards the EU is vividly demonstrated by the example of North Macedonia. The position of the European Union is that a compromise must be found even on such sensitive issues as history, language and national identity. That said, the participation of EU officials in the negotiation process does not guarantee a speedy resolution of the dispute.

It is advisable for Ukraine to review conflict issues with EU member states in advance and, if possible, start the process of finding a compromise, mindful that this is a mandatory part of European integration.

Systematic involvement of the EU in the settlement of conflicts in the Eastern Partnership, modeled on the settlement in the Western Balkans (participation in the negotiation format, a special envoy, peacekeeping missions), **could become an inflection point in the full Europe-**

⁹² Moldova already participates in the Process.

an integration of Ukraine and other members of the trio. However, in this case, as the Western Balkans experience shows, advancement towards the EU will be made directly contingent on the outcome of conflict resolution and post-conflict relief, including transitional justice. In addition, it should be borne in mind that the format of EU involvement and the methodology of the EaP settlement process will by definition differ from similar activities in the Western Balkans (due to Russia's involvement in the conflicts in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, since Russia does not seek to become an EU member).

At the same time, despite the significance of security issues, **the central way for achieving progress in accession to the European Union still lies through the implementation of reforms, especially in the rule of law and the fight against corruption.** According to the new methodology of EU enlargement, the requirements for candidates related to the rule of law, the effective functioning of democratic processes and institutions and the efficient fight against corruption become key in assessing the progress of a country and, consequently, admitting it to the EU. Showcasing Ukraine's progress in these areas remains an indispensable condition for European integration.



ABOUT NEW EUROPE CENTER

The New Europe Center was founded in 2017 as an independent think-tank. Despite its new brand, it is based on a research team that has been working together since 2009, at the Institute for World Policy. The New Europe Center became recognized by offering high-quality analysis on foreign policy issues in Ukraine and regional security by combining active, effective work with advocacy.

The New Europe Center's vision is very much in line with the views of the majority of Ukrainians about the future of their country: Ukraine should be integrated into the European Union and NATO. By integration, we understand not so much formal membership as the adoption of the best standards and practices for Ukraine to properly belong to the Euroatlantic value system.

More about New Europe Center: neweurope.org.ua